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## **Waiting in the asylum determination process: Just an empty interlude?**

Rebecca Rotter

### **Abstract**

In both the academic literature and the public imagination, waiting time is often understood as passive, empty and wasted, particularly when associated with institutional or organisational settings. The purpose of this paper is to challenge this limited conceptualisation, by exploring the experiences of asylum seekers who waited between 2 and 9 years in the UK for a resolution of their precarious immigration status in Glasgow, UK. When asked to describe their experiences of waiting, these individuals tended to articulate the dominant notion of waiting as passive, stagnant time spent 'doing nothing'. Rather than taking such narrative accounts at face value, I consider broader ethnographic material pertaining to their everyday lives, which attests to a more complex lived experience of waiting. I argue that their waiting was affective, involving a heightened anticipation of the future and reflection on desired and dreaded outcomes; active, as they structured and filled their time with a variety of routines, activities and projects; and, in a more limited sense, productive, as waiting time could be transformed into capital. I conclude that for the asylum seekers involved in this research, waiting was not an empty interlude between events but an intentional and agential process.

**Keywords:** Waiting, time, migration, asylum seekers, asylum determination process, Scotland, UK.

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## Introduction

Waiting is a universal condition which punctuates everyday life at all stages of the life course.

However, waiting events have proliferated with modernity, where the individual plays a small part and exercises limited control in complex, interdependent processes (Giddens 1990; Vanstone 1982).

Reflections on waiting commonly relate to “quotidian waiting events” (Bissell 2007) – waiting for the kettle to boil, for public transport, for appointments or test results – which are short-term and part of everyday corporeal experience. While the social scientific literature is full of references to people – slum dwellers, the unemployed, the rural poor, and migrants – engaged in long-term or ‘chronic’ waiting for life projects to be realised, relatively few studies have treated waiting as an event, experience or object worthy of analysis in its own right (Bourdieu 1999; Bayart 2007; Jeffrey 2008, 2010; Auyero 2011). Moreover, in both the academic literature and the public imagination, waiting time is commonly perceived to be useless, wasted time, particularly when associated with institutional or organisational settings in which capitalist notions of productivity reign (Gasparini 1995; Schweizer 2008; Sellarberg 2008). In his fictional meditation on time, *The Magic Mountain*, Thomas Mann writes that waiting “consumes whole spaces of time without our living them or making any use of them as such.” (1962: 279). Caught between the unfolding present and the awaited future event, and with reduced capacity to change this situation, the individual who waits is thought to be rendered passive. As Vincent Crapanzano (1986: 45) writes, waiting is:

a sort of holding action – a lingering. (In its extreme forms waiting can lead to paralysis.) In waiting, the present loses its focus in the now. The world in its immediacy slips away; it is derealized. It is without élan, vitality, creative force. It is numb, muted, dead. Its only meaning lies in the future – in the arrival or the non-arrival of the object of waiting.

This paper seeks to challenge this limited conceptualisation of waiting, and to contribute to a growing body of work on chronic/long-term waiting, by exploring the bureaucratically-induced waiting of a group of asylum seekers in Glasgow, UK. After applying for asylum, these individuals waited between 2 and 9 years for a resolution of their precarious immigration status, and for what they saw as a 'normal', secure life. When prompted to describe their waiting, they tended to articulate their experiences in terms of stagnant, empty time spent 'doing nothing'. However, rather than taking such narrative accounts at face value, I consider broader ethnographic material generated from immersion in the asylum seekers' everyday lives, which attests to a more complex lived experience of waiting as affective, active and productive.

Waiting is affective as it brings to the fore anticipation and desire (and possibly also dread). As David Bissell notes, the promise of the event-to-come is what produces the experience of waiting (Bissell 2007: 282), and the intentionality of this act derives from the presence of some degree of caring; one cannot be indifferent to something and wait for it. As such, the experience of waiting is the experience of the world mattering in some sense, and heightens people's awareness of their needs (Vanstone 1982: 103-107). As I will show, the asylum seekers who participated in this research were keenly anticipating the future, weighing up possibilities and imagining alternative scenarios, events and states of being.

Waiting may be active in the sense that people are able, under certain conditions, to fill waiting time with a range of activities which are both present-focused (giving meaning to everyday life) and future-focused (directed towards desired futures). For my participants, such activities included socialising, praying, immersing themselves in daily routines, gathering information about the asylum process, and eliciting support from peers. Indeed, waiting (and being denied that which they waited for) served as an impetus to pursue actions to secure the right to remain in the UK and a 'normal

life'. I thus show that waiting is incorporated into quotidian routines and projects, and should not be placed outside of everyday life (Conlon 2011).

Finally, there may be instances in which waiting time can be productively used by those who wait, such as when it is transformed into a form of capital, or retrospectively understood as 'preparatory' for the future. I contend that despite being painfully restrictive and uncertain, waiting for asylum was, for my participants, neither stagnant, empty time, nor characterised by abject passivity. This ultimately suggests that more may be taking place during seemingly uneventful periods of waiting than meets the eye; even for people who have endured loss, trauma, and protracted uncertainty, waiting may entail intentionality, action and potential.

### **Ethnographic context**

This paper is based on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out during 2007 and 2008<sup>i</sup> with around sixty asylum seekers, as well as their legal representatives, other migrant and non-migrant residents, and the staff of voluntary sector organisations in Glasgow. I conducted participant observation with individuals in their daily routines - socialising in their homes, going shopping together, attending meetings with solicitors, observing asylum appeal hearings, and participating in local community projects, meetings and events – and carried out life history interviews with key participants. Most of the asylum seekers involved in the research were women who lived with their spouse and/or children, although there were also some married men with children, and some single men. They came from over twenty-four countries in the Maghreb, the Caucasus, West and East Africa, South-Eastern Europe, the Middle East and South Asia. They had sought asylum due to experiences of intimidation, oppression, and in some cases torture, by agents of the state, government-sponsored militias or non-state actors in their countries of origin, having been targeted for their (or family members') political activities, religious practices, or ethnic identities. Some had

arrived in the country and applied for asylum a matter of months before I met them, while others had been living in Glasgow as asylum seekers for many years. Levels of educational attainment and professional experience varied; a few individuals (particularly women) had completed primary school then carried out domestic roles, but most were high school educated with some work experience, and several individuals possessed postgraduate degrees and had held prestigious posts in their countries of origin. The experiences of the individuals who made up this heterogeneous group are not intended to be taken as representative of asylum seekers in the UK or Glasgow as a whole. The most vulnerable asylum seekers in particular, who are isolated from support networks, speak little English, and face destitution and/or forced removal, are likely to have very different experiences of waiting.

Applications for asylum in the UK must be submitted to the Home Office, the UK government department responsible for immigration and asylum. Most applicants are then granted temporary leave to enter or remain in the UK while their claim is being considered<sup>ii</sup>. The asylum process involves a series of events: the asylum interview with a government official, meetings with legal representatives, transfer to State accommodation, an initial decision on the asylum claim, and so forth. In roughly three-quarters of cases, the initial decision is a refusal (Home Office 2000a, 2006) and the applicant has a right of appeal against this decision to an immigration tribunal. Lodging an appeal instigates another process with its own actions carried out by a host of actors including civil servants, immigration judges and legal representatives. If the appeal is allowed, the case is returned to the Home Office and Refugee Status<sup>iii</sup> or a form of humanitarian protection may be granted; if dismissed, the individual can in some cases pursue a further right of appeal to higher courts. The protracted nature of my participants' waiting can be attributed to what was, at the time, a lengthy bureaucratic-legal process, as well as delays in the system caused by problems arranging interviews, the need for applicants to receive medical referrals, investigations into whether the UK government

could return applicants to 'safe' countries, reconsideration of decisions by the Home Office, suspension of processing of applications from some nationalities, multiple adjournments of appeal hearings, and no apparent reason (National Audit Office 2004: 24-35; Asylum Aid 1999: 10).

While waiting, applicants are banned from working. They can apply for financial support<sup>iv</sup> and accommodation from the government if they agree to be dispersed to housing on a no-choice basis in one of a number of cities outside the south-east of England, including Glasgow. Consequently, most live in the wider community, albeit overwhelmingly in areas of socio-economic deprivation (Hynes 2011). Although permitted to travel freely within the UK, they cannot leave the country and are required by law to report regularly to the Home Office. Asylum policies are developed by the UK government based in Westminster, but parliamentary devolution in 1998 delivered control of a number of areas of governance directly affecting asylum seekers in Scotland to the Scottish government: integration and social inclusion, policing, legal services, education, and health care. Unlike the UK government, which has pursued a policy of deterrence (Home Office 2000b, 2005; UKBA 2009), the Scottish government has fostered a broadly welcoming approach to asylum seekers, pledging to facilitate their 'integration' from the point of arrival in Scotland (SRIF 2003; Williams & De Lima 2006). This approach is reflected in funding for a range of tailored support services, including befriending and advocacy schemes, volunteering programmes, women's groups, exercise classes, arts-based groups, information and legal advice services, and drop-ins distributing free clothing and household goods. It has classified asylum-seeking school leavers as Scottish students, making them eligible for free undergraduate education at Scottish universities<sup>v</sup>, and provided access to free, part-time<sup>vi</sup> education for asylum seeking adults. As a consequence, although my participants were excluded from various political, economic and social domains, and subject to intense controls, they could generally access a variety of formal services and resources, in contrast to asylum seekers in many parts of England.

Much of the existing research on asylum has focused on the content of 'events' (the journey, the asylum interview, the appeal hearing) in the asylum seeker's life or in the asylum determination process. However, the ordinary 'non-events', or everyday life of waiting *between* these events, have received much less attention, perhaps because it is assumed that nothing (of interest) happens during these periods. As I will show in this paper, these periods are sources of suffering, reflection and action in which people experience a heightened awareness of their fears, desires, and future possibilities.

### **Waiting for asylum as a particular kind of waiting**

In its varied forms, waiting contains certain prevailing structures: it is directed at something, such as the arrival of a physical object, the commencement of an event, the achievement of a particular state, a change of circumstance, and so on; it has positive and negative modalities; it is inscribed with meanings by various actors; and has a temporality in terms of both duration and tempo.

Waiting may be instrumental (Crapanzano 1986) or situational (Dwyer 2009), where people wait for specific, known and tangible objects or end goals: the arrival of a train, an appointment with the doctor, the birth of a child. Instrumental/situational waiting can have a positive modality, which is infused with desire because it is directed at something that is longed for; or a negative modality which is oriented to something that is dreaded. The possibilities or outcomes associated with the object for which one waits to a large extent determine the modalities available (Crapanzano 1986).

Conversely, waiting may be existential (Dwyer 2009), in which case the object is not known, is hidden, or is unknowable, but is regularly given a symbolic object, expressed in abstract terms such as the end of the world, death and eternal peace (Crapanzano 1986: 47). This is the waiting of Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's (1969) *Waiting for Godot*, who, in Vladimir's words, are waiting for "nothing very definite" (*ibid.*: 18). Theirs is not waiting which will end in fulfillment or validation,



but is rather the kind of waiting that we most fear: just waiting (Schweizer 2008). Waiting is also imbued with meaning. According to Giovanni Gasparini (1995: 31), it may be a temporary interruption to action, possibly perceived as wasted time; interstitial time filled with substitute meanings; or a completed and meaningful experience from the actor's point of view. Waiting also has its own temporality, in terms of both tempo (the flow of time or *durée*) (Bergson 2005), and duration (how long one expects to wait and how long one actually waits). Short- and long-term forms of waiting can involve very different use of time (Tang 2012: 225).

From the asylum seekers' accounts of their arrival and application for asylum in the UK, it is clear that at the outset, their waiting was directed primarily at one object: the initial decision. The common expectation of being granted the right to remain was disappointed when the refusal letter arrived. By the time I began my fieldwork, many had appealed the decision and, indeed, passed through several appeals and subsequent dismissals from the tribunal. Consequently, they were dispersed across different stages of the asylum process, each associated with slightly different immediate objects. Generally speaking, the long-term waiting of individuals with active appeals was punctuated by instances of short-term waiting for immediate objects, such as a meeting with their solicitor; a letter confirming the date of an appeal hearing; or the delivery of the appeal decision. Their waiting could be fulfilled by due process. The waiting of individuals who had exhausted all appeal rights and were at risk of forcible return was attuned to notification of removal directions, and/or the prospect of being able to build a fresh claim. People who had exhausted all appeal rights but could not be returned to their country of origin for various reasons experienced long-term waiting for a change in policy that would make them eligible for permanent stay, such as a government amnesty.

For all, waiting was instrumental, directed in its positive modality to the specific, discernible goal of attaining Refugee Status. This, however, also took on a symbolic value; it was widely felt that the granting of the right to remain in the UK would deliver a 'normal', 'free' and inclusive existence in the host society, and that life could then 'move forward' (cf. Brekke 2004; Lacroix 2004; Stewart 2005). Some individuals also positively waited for reunion with estranged family members and a transformation of the political situation in the country of origin which would enable safe return. The negative modality of their waiting was ultimately forcible removal from the UK to the country of origin, where some expected to face imprisonment, ill-treatment, or possibly death. For many, return represented the destruction of a life they had been working so hard to build and a complete rupture for children who had been born and raised in the UK. As they were offered little indication of how long it would take for the process to reach a conclusion, their waiting was indefinite. The shortest length of time a person waited for a final outcome was two years, and the longest, nine years.

In the following substantive sections, I begin by examining the ways in which my participants' narrative accounts of waiting cohere with dominant notions of waiting. I then explore contrasting accounts and observations pertaining to the same participants, which reveals that waiting is a complex dialectical process, involving a sense of empty, idle, suspended time, but also emotionally and cognitively demanding, active, productive time, particularly as people draw upon their own social capital and the resources available in their local setting.

### **Waiting as passive, empty time in which 'nothing happens'**

Waiting is commonly conceptualised as a passive state in which people lack agency. In the words of Ghassan Hage (2009: 2), waiting:

involve[s] a large degree of passivity: things are beyond our control, out of our hands, and we can 'only wait' for what we wish to happen, as opposed to actively doing something or another to make it happen.

The customary phrase 'to sit and wait and hope for the best' readily encapsulates this sense. There is also a strong association between waiting and boredom or inertia (Ferrie & Wiseman, this issue), as the person who waits is seen to merely 'pass time', time which cannot be spent doing anything more useful (Moran 2005: 7). W.H. Vanstone (1982) suggests that states of dependency and passivity are now commonplace because modernity is characterised by a complex system of inter-dependent relations in which the individual plays only a small part, which forces him/her to wait upon others to perform their roles in the system. "[O]ne has no alternative to waiting," he writes, "no personal action or initiative to which one can resort in lieu of that which the system, in its own time, delivers" (Vanstone 1982: 19). However, there is a widespread belief that such dependency is a diminution of our true function and status, and an insult to our dignity, which results in a devaluation of those who cannot achieve a state of independence. Vanstone traces this modern Western avoidance of dependency and inactivity back to the value placed by the capitalist system on productive labour, itself derived from the Calvinist movement (Weber 1930). As E.P. Thompson (1967) has deftly shown, the growth of capitalism and church reform saw the introduction of a 'time-discipline', which was congruent with both the objectives of efficiency in the labour force, and the Christian Puritan aversion to idleness. Time came to be seen as relatively abstract and quantifiable, and split into leisure time (the worker's own time) and labour time (which the employer must *use* efficiently). Time thus became currency and was 'spent' rather than 'passed' (Thompson 1967: 61). The enduring result of this shift is that waiting, in Western contexts, is primarily conceptualised as undesirable, unproductive and wasteful (Schwartz 1974; Bissell 2007; Schweizer 2008; Sellerberg 2008).

Passivity is also an enduring theme in (forced) migration scholarship. Critical studies have elucidated dominant linguistic constructions of migrants, by way of liquid metaphors, as an undifferentiated mass, controlled by external forces (Turton 2003); analysed practices of containment and forced dependency in nefarious spaces of waiting such as the refugee camp, the transit centre, and the detention or 'immigration removal' centre (Knudsen 1983; Chan and Loveridge 1987; Hyndman 2000; Agier 2008; see also Turnbull this issue); and critiqued State policies and procedures which require asylum seekers to "wait patiently, surviving without recourse to public funds, without being visible" and "to present themselves as passive victims, grateful for being granted whatever minimal tolerance they are shown" (Schuster 2011: 402). Waiting has also been analysed as one of several forms of "temporal uncertainty" which "keeps deportable migrants in a passive and desperate state of continual transience and uncertainty" (Griffiths 2014: 15).

### ***Doing nothing***

When prompted to reflect upon their experiences of waiting, the asylum seekers involved in this research tended to describe it in ways consistent with the dominant view of waiting as passive, empty, 'devalued' time. During my fieldwork, I would regularly meet Karim, an activist, businessman and devout Muslim from Darfur, at cafes, the library, or the high rise flat where he and his family were living. Our meetings were characterised by intense conversations, often led by him, about world politics, the situation in Sudan, and religion. One day I asked him why he would speak fervently about all kinds of things yet rarely voluntarily raise the topic of his asylum case. He replied:

*It's very difficult Rebecca...I don't talk about it as there is nothing to do for my case...Now it's a matter of time, I'm just waiting now. What am I to do? You want me to go to the Home Office and demand [Refugee] Status? I came for protection and now I'm waiting two years and four months. Til now my case is hanging. That is shameful for me and for the British*

*government. If you want to accept people, it's better to let things go easy. Why put people here for two years – some people five years – and they don't know what is happening?*

*Rebecca, imagine you are waiting two years! The feeling is very bad for me.*

He continued, focusing on the restraint of the waiting period, particularly profound uncertainty about the future, his inability to realise his intellectual and professional potential, and obstacles to carrying out political activism to bring about lasting change in Sudan:

*Two years and a half cut from my life – I am not allowed to work or to study, I am just waiting for a weekly bursary [welfare payment] or going to college to learn part-time. This is not my ambition. My ambition is more than that. Returning would be very bad – I am facing death! I don't worry for myself but our people there will lose. When I am here, if I get Refugee Status, I will do many things for the people there – speak out for the people there, go to discussions with the government. Now there are discussions in Libya and I can't go there. People are calling to talk two hours on the phone to discuss and to plan with me. When I am sitting here, I'm doing nothing.*

Karim's description of waiting as 'sitting' and 'doing nothing' is a familiar one. In this account, he expresses a sense of passivity due to his inability to bring about a change in his situation because the object of his waiting may be sought but essentially, its arrival or non-arrival is beyond his control (Crapanzano 1986).

Sevda and her husband Maksim, a couple in their thirties from Azerbaijan, had struggled through years of successive appeals, sudden detention and forced separation, and finally release and more

waiting, when I met them. We sat together in the living room of their high rise flat one summer's day, eating salted apples and sipping black tea. When the conversation turned to my research, they declared in sync, "we can tell you what it's like to wait!" Sevda specified: "It is like your life has stopped. When you're waiting you're just sitting at home like couch potatoes. There is nothing to do". Maksim added "it's very difficult...I want to work but I'm not allowed to". Sevda pointed to the other activities that they were prevented from undertaking – choosing where they would like to live and decorating their flat – and spoke of her fears of what would happen to her and her family in the future. Sevda's perception that life has stopped and that 'nothing happens' specifically relates to restrictions imposed by asylum policy. Like Karim's account, it suggests that waiting involves passivity, idleness and subordination (Crapanzano 1986; Bourdieu 1999; Schwartz 1974).

Narrative accounts are not simply reflective of life as lived, but are creative constructions or interpretations of the past, generated in specific contexts of the present, and offer the means by which people can create order, project into the future, seek to alleviate suffering and affect change in their situations (Knudsen 1990; Riessman 1993; Eastmond 2007). Thus, the narrative accounts presented should be interpreted in light of the social, cultural, legal and political contexts from which these individuals came and were currently situated. Having previously been the principal providers for their families in societies without the provision of state welfare, they saw work as a primary source of identity and status, the deprivation of which was immensely undermining. Many had endured disempowering experiences of persecution prior to their departure, and one way of reconstructing their lives in the UK was by reclaiming their ability to exercise choice and to act purposively (Rotter 2010). Their accounts emphasise the perceptual contiguity between the passivity of waiting as such and the passivity of being forced to submit to authority and relinquish their dignity for handouts due to asylum policies (Fuglerud 1999: 124). By suggesting that waiting for

asylum is a wasted, devalued period, they were critiquing state policies and practices which structure asylum seekers' lives.

### ***Life on pause***

The idea that 'nothing happens' when waiting may relate not only to restrictions on the ability to act in spatial terms, but also to a sense of suspension of movement in time. Temporal specificity – the presence or absence of a deadline as a promise of action – is an important aspect of waiting (Richards & Rotter 2013; Khosravi 2014). A deadline may act as a point in the imagined future to which an individual may orient himself/herself, which engenders a certain degree of expectation of an outcome in temporal terms. In forms of waiting where a deadline is specified, the time between the present and that perceptible point in the future can be transformed into graduating stages, which enable the individual to locate themselves in relation to the end point. Such stages may be identified through 'time-reckoning' or a calculation of 'clock' duration with reference to inferential schemes (Gell 1992). This kind of expectation gives the actor some degree of control over the situation, through knowledge and the power to influence the course of events (Gasparini 1995). Asylum seekers, however, are not provided with deadlines for major events, such as Home Office decisions or outcomes of appeals. The objects for which they waited were located at an unidentifiable point in the unfolding future, giving their waiting an "open-endedness" (Brekke 2004: 23), which Barry Schwartz describes as "punitive sanctioning of the most extreme kind" (1974: 862). Furthermore, developments in individuals' cases, such the refusal of an appeal, did not indicate whether success or failure was imminent. The trajectory of asylum cases was less linear and more like a game of Snakes and Ladders. Waiting involved a series of attempts; of trying, failing and starting again. Even if they appeared to be close to the end-point – for example, when preparing for an appeal hearing about which their legal representative felt very confident – there was no certainty that they would not end up being refused again. This created a sense of paralysis or restricted, non-

linear movement in time. As an Algerian mother and asylum activist named Manal said of her wait, “Our life was put on pause for 6 years and a half.” She expressed the temporal duality of biologically ageing whilst simultaneously stagnating in broader life projects: “Can you imagine, six years have gone away from your life? You know, I remember when I came here I was younger. I feel now I am getting old, old (...) I feel I have never done nothing even though I am very much involved.”

In the remainder of the paper I draw upon narrative accounts and ethnographic observations of the everyday lives of the same individuals, to identify three other dimensions of waiting: waiting as an affective state which involves an amplified awareness of what people wanted and sought to avoid, waiting as a period of intense activity, and waiting as a tentatively productive undertaking. This material gives substance to the contention that “waiting does not have to mean passivity” (Khosravi 2014: 2), and reveals that waiting is not always an “empty interlude” (Chan & Loveridge 1987) in the migratory experience.

### **Waiting as affective**

As outlined above, the asylum seekers involved in this research were engaged in instrumental waiting, directed at events in the asylum process and a final immigration decision. They were focused on their (uncertain) futures, actively anticipating possibilities that may eventuate. At social events people often asked others with active asylum claims or whose applications had been successful, about their experiences in the process, in an effort to develop an idea of the paths their own cases could take. They spoke of the stress of not knowing what would happen to them in the future, describing this heightened state of uncertainty as torturous (Richards & Rotter 2013). Yet they were actively anticipating what *could* happen; what Dewey (1930) labelled ‘dramatic rehearsal in imagination’. In anticipation, the hypothetical possibility is regarded as of instrumental value in coming to terms with the real, rather than of intrinsic interest (Dewey 1930 cited in Casey 1976).



Anticipation can be separated into two forms: expressive, which entails visualising how things will be in terms of one's emotional state, and practical, which is more geared towards planning what to do (Casey 1976).

I interviewed a young Zimbabwean woman, Mudiwa, when she was preparing for her second appeal hearing. Her reflections on the progress of her case highlight both the expressive and practical aspects of anticipation:

*...you end up asking yourself 'Why me?' and 'Is it going to work out? Is it not going to work out?' Yeah, so it's kind of depressing (...) I've tried just to occupy my thoughts with stuff like books or writing or whatever. But then you know, the thing is if something is really in your mind... you can't control it. I might be talking to you but I might be thinking: What's going to happen to me? (...) You can try to sleep but you don't, you stay awake coz you're thinking about what is going to happen (...) There was this time when I couldn't even play with [my son]. He would come to me and I didn't have any energy at all to play with him coz my mind was just too busy thinking about the possibilities and what's going to happen and how I'm going to...*

Such anticipations, while compulsive and taxing, are a form of preparation for the possibility of the negative modality of waiting being realised. People regularly laboured over questions such as: what will I do if immigration officers come to get me? Who will I contact? Will I be separated from my family if they detain me? What will happen if I am deported – will I be detained at the airport? How will I survive? This constant orientation to the future in waiting was raised by Asad, a middle-aged African man, when he described how he temporarily 'opted out' of the UK asylum process by going to Ireland and making another application there:

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

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

Anticipation was also evident in relation to the positive modality of waiting. In continuously waiting, people dwelled deeply on what it was that they were actually waiting for: what ‘the papers’ represented. As Bourdieu puts it, waiting involves “the interested aiming at something greatly desired durably” (1999: 228). A person can be durably ‘held’ only insofar as s/he possesses *illusio*, investment in the game (*ibid.*). Desire for, and investment in, the attainment of certain objects or outcomes, are integral to instrumental waiting. The experience of waiting is thus the experience of things being of significance and can direct the individual’s attention to their desires and needs (Vanstone 1982). When I asked Mudiwa how she imagined her life would be if she was granted Refugee Status, she replied:

*I think, for me, that would be the greatest thing ever. Coz after four years I would finally have something that I'm really, really happy about, like something positive in my life, coz I've just had so many (...) negative things happening in my life. That would be a huge step, not only*

*for me but for my son as well coz I know I will start making a life for my son (...) And I will have a life as well. I'll go to school. You know, all those things I've dreamt of doing I think I'll do them...And I'll just feel like I'm independent. You know? No one is looking over my shoulder and seeing what I'm doing and what I'm up to. Like someone owns me. Someone controls me...That would be a good thing...a major boost in my life.*

On another occasion she told me: "I just imagine I had my status, a job, a house – I think about all the details." Others had strikingly similar dreams, outlining all of the ways in which life would change once they were granted the right to remain: they would be able to work, enrol in full-time studies, contribute to society, choose where to live, get married, be reunited with family members, drive a car, travel abroad on holidays, and overcome the stagnation and exclusion which characterised the waiting period. As the excerpt from Mudiwa above suggests, people expected that a shift in state-imposed categories would herald a change in their own demeanour, from feeling subordinate and controlled to autonomous. It was also commonly imagined that attaining a secure immigration status would deliver the ability to predict and determine the future, a release from constant fears and worries about being forcibly returned to the country of origin, and recovery from the chronic, stress-induced illnesses they were suffering from. I have argued thus far that waiting is a dynamic, engaged process in terms of its intentional structure and the cognitive and emotional resources it requires. In the next section I will show that this argument also holds in terms of the pragmatic fields of everyday life.

### **Waiting as active**

Interview-based studies investigating the everyday lives of asylum seekers in the UK have emphasised common experiences of boredom and idleness (Sigona & Torre 2005; Stewart 2005; Griffiths 2014). As described above, my participants also lamented that in waiting, nothing happens.

However, ethnographic immersion in daily their lives enabled me to observe that they tended to fill their days with a variety and high volume of activities. They socialised, studied, shopped, undertook domestic work, prayed, gathered information about the asylum process, and supported and elicited support from peers. If in waiting, the ability to act depends upon the particular resources available to the waiter such as the technologies at hand and the spaces in which waiting is done (Hage 2009), in this case, the variety of (devolved) services and spaces accessible to people in the asylum process in Glasgow provided opportunities to act.

Many families in particular had developed busy daily routines; preparing the children for the day ahead, escorting them to school, travelling to college to attend classes, collecting the children, going to a local meeting to discuss and lobby on asylum issues, and returning home to cook the evening meal and put the children to bed. Enrolment in part-time education was widespread, and many people were committed to developing their English language skills and/or gaining qualifications in computing, accounting, business or social care, to increase their chances of finding a job or being able to set up a business if granted the right to remain. Some individuals also regularly volunteered for or attended social activities run by voluntary sector organisations. For example, every Monday afternoon, a group of women gathered at a project hosted by a local charity, to socialise, share the lunch they prepared on a rotating basis, and work on arts and crafts projects. Such activities had specific goals (organising an event, completing an assignment, attaining a qualification) and temporalities (the working week, the college semester, the academic year), which helped to produce a sense of progress in time.

Most men and women had established social networks consisting of other asylum seekers, neighbours, classmates and members of an extended linguistic or national community. Those belonging to the larger communities from Sudan and Eritrea attended gatherings to celebrate

national or religious days. People regularly hosted and made visits to the homes of their friends, sometimes spending many hours preparing elaborate meals and catering to the needs of their guests. Women told me that they found release from the cognitive pull and emotional strain of waiting by carrying out tasks and activities. Activity could produce complete immersion in immediate sensation, freeing them temporarily from anxiety about the future (Lynch 1972). As a woman from the Maghreb named Taliba said: “you just can’t think about [the papers] because it drives you crazy. Thinking about it doesn’t change anything, it just makes you feel worse. You got to find other things to do.” Another woman added that although having three children was difficult while an asylum seeker, children were the best distraction: “when I had a baby, I didn’t think about my case at all.”

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

*if you worked hard for the thing you may get it and you may not. At this stage, it would be the will of the God. At this stage, because you’ve worked hard for it...As Mohammed Sallahu Wasallam peace onto him said, make the cause. Make the cause. That means try to do the thing and you will get it...Prayer is 3% of what God asks you to do. 97% has to be done in your life, in conjunction. That’s why Islam helps me in the asylum process.*

One local initiative, in which Manal played a key role, aimed to provide a platform for addressing issues faced by asylum seekers, such as destitution, community safety, housing, and negative press coverage. At its regular meetings, people disseminated information about policy updates, bureaucratic procedures, timescales, documentation, and others’ first hand experiences, which gave

them an idea of the actions they could take towards securing a positive outcome. Many were also extremely active in lobbying and garnering public support for their right to remain in the UK: speaking vociferously at events attended by government officials, policy makers and members of the public; attending public demonstrations; and contributing to submissions to the Home Office and formal enquiries into the asylum process. A couple of individuals said that this activism was important while waiting, as it put them in the public spotlight, secured an extended network of advocates who could help them if they were at immanent risk of being detained, and thus enhanced their safety. As Manal put it, “we are released by the support which we’ve been getting from nice people. Scottish people, organisations, and new Scottish government have done so much things.” She speculated that without them, “maybe all asylum seekers would be early deported, in one box.” Considerable numbers of people stopped attending local projects and withdrew from activism once they received Leave to Remain. In other words, many activities were pursued as a direct response to not having ‘the papers’ and not knowing whether or when one would receive them. Far from ‘doing nothing’ while waiting, the majority of my participants were engaged in multifarious activities, often in an effort to manage or alleviate the negative effects of waiting, to subvert oppressive state control over their lives, and to realise their desired futures.

### **Waiting as productive**

Several scholars have recognised that there are situations in which people consciously choose to wait (Minnegal 2009: 90) or seek to delay processes, which results in the experience of waiting, in pursuit of specific gains. Karlheinz Geißler (2002) notes that for businesses, slow dynamics, such as ‘holding out’ for the right time to launch a product on the market, contribute to productivity. Yet, he observes, there is no training in strategic delay within the business world because waiting is not regarded as an important or productive form of time. Ann-Mari Sellerberg (2008) argues that waiting may have positive consequences for organisations, as it can sometimes serve to reduce

applicants/users' motivation for a particular service, product or case resolution so that they no longer demand it, or open up the possibility of users' needs being met by other circumstances. While asylum seekers have few opportunities and limited power to delay and thus take advantage of such productive aspects of waiting, there were several ways in which those involved in this research could be seen to engage in productive waiting (see also Griffiths 2014; Andersson 2014).

First, successful applications for adjournment of appeal hearings provided asylum seekers with more time to prepare their cases (by securing quality legal representation, obtaining documentary evidence in support of their claim, finding witnesses to give oral evidence in the hearing, etc.). This meant longer waiting time but potentially a stronger case. Legal representatives pointed out that the more time they were able to spend with their client, the greater their ability to represent them.

Second, at the time of the research, an asylum seeker's duration of residence in the UK could help to qualify them for Leave to Remain on non-asylum grounds, through the application of human rights law<sup>vii</sup>, or, in the more unique case which applied to most of my participants, through a government asylum backlog clearing exercise known as the legacy case review<sup>viii</sup>. As word spread that the Home Office would consider any compelling reasons for people with 'legacy cases' to remain in the UK, many of my participants started to conceptualise the years of waiting as a potential asset. For example, several months after submitting an asylum appeal application through the normal legal route, Mudiwa had still not received confirmation of a hearing and consulted her legal representative. He advised her that it would be better not to try to hasten the setting of a date for the hearing because in another six months she might be eligible for consideration under the legacy case review, and her being in the UK longer and her child being older would be an advantage. Mudiwa still bemoaned the pains of waiting but did also concede to, and even evoke as a kind of panacea, the usefulness of waiting and its superiority to hastening a negative outcome.

Finally, those who worked with asylum seekers in supporting roles – such as service providers and the staff of voluntary sector organisations – saw time as currency, in enabling asylum seekers to accumulate knowledge and aptitude in everyday affairs, and in allowing relationships of trust to develop between asylum seekers and their supporters. From the perspective of these supporters, such capital helped them to effectively perform their roles, but was also of benefit to asylum seekers in terms of their daily affairs, asylum cases, and desired futures (see also Rosenberg 2008). This accords with a retrospective view expressed by Mudiwa when she was finally granted Leave to Remain. She told me “you know, now that I have my status, I’m glad that I didn’t get it before, because I wouldn’t have been ready for it.” She qualified: “when I applied for asylum, I was alone, depressed, young, inexperienced, I didn’t know anything and I had a baby. I wasn’t ready to study or other anything like that.” Now, her child was approaching school age, she had close friends and a partner, and felt both knowledgeable about life in the UK and comfortable about living in Glasgow. She had been accepted into her chosen tertiary degree programme and was ready to begin studying. Consequently, she felt that this ‘new start’ to life had come at the appropriate time. In other words, waiting was akin to the liminal phase in the rites of passage (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969): a preparatory period for the subsequent dispensation of Leave to Remain, which confers upon the individual a state of ‘independence’, in which s/he assumes responsibility for accommodation, subsistence, and personal development. Therefore, in limited ways, the waiting I observed could be viewed as a productive or preparatory force, but this was crucially dependent on the extent to which waiting time could be transformed into a valuable resource.

## **Conclusion**

Waiting is commonly understood as a passive state because the objects which we desire are out of reach in space and time, and we cannot do anything to hasten their arrival. Modern understandings



of time as quantified and commoditised devalue periods of waiting, rendering them inactive, empty and wasted. When the asylum seekers involved in this research directly reflected on their waiting, they tended to articulate a congruent sense of waiting as a frustratingly disempowering, empty, static time. Their experiences of waiting were inextricably linked to exclusion from social and economic domains, forced dependence on welfare, and acute uncertainty about the trajectory their cases would take. The case presented shows that the dominant notion of waiting as 'wasted time' is a powerful trope through which people can critique political, economic and social systems of oppression which usurp their time.

However, simply reproducing such accounts masks the more complex ethnographic picture of waiting as an affective, active and, in limited circumstances, productive, process. Waiting involved anticipation, where people reflected on what they desired and valued (and, it follows, what was lacking in the present), constructing an idyllic future and preparing for the worst case scenario. People also made use of the available resources and time, actively pursuing various activities to release themselves from the cognitive burden of waiting and to gain a sense of movement towards specific goals. Such activity was possible because of the local context in which people waited but also because of the long-term duration of waiting, which allowed them to construct a relatively stable, routinised tempo, in contrast to the frenzied time that many irregular migrants experience (cf. Griffiths 2014). Waiting could also be seen as productive, in providing more time to strengthen asylum cases, build relationships, or prepare for more permanent settlement in the UK; however, in the case in question, the transformation of time into capital was most obviously dependent upon external processes, such as the legacy case review.

I do not wish to romanticise asylum seekers' waiting or to overlook the political implications of making people wait. Waiting can constitute an insidious means of exercising control over and

profiting from those who are categorised as ‘undesirables’ (Andersson 2014). My present aim has been more modest: to argue against the ubiquitous common sense view of waiting as an empty, banal, wasted interlude, which leaves little space for any recognition of asylum seekers’ individual and collective agency. The material presented ultimately suggests that seemingly uneventful periods of waiting are greatly significant. Even for people who have endured loss, trauma, and protracted uncertainty, waiting may, under certain conditions, entail intentionality, action and potential.

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### **NOTES**

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<sup>i</sup> With contact and visits throughout subsequent years.

<sup>ii</sup> Some applicants are incarcerated and routed into an accelerated procedure known as the Detained Fast Track. My research did not extend to such cases.

<sup>iii</sup> Refugee Status entails a grant of Limited Leave to Remain, initially for a period of 5 years.

<sup>iv</sup> At the time of the research, welfare payments were set at a rate of 70% of mainstream welfare benefits, which amounted to £39 per week for single adults; £91 for a couple with a child; and £30 for every additional child.

<sup>v</sup> Students eligible for free tertiary education are those who have attended three years of high school in Scotland.

<sup>vi</sup> Part-time is classified as up to 16 hours per week.

<sup>vii</sup> Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (the Right to Respect for Private and Family Life). The application of this right has been drastically curtailed by legislation introduced since the time of the research.

<sup>viii</sup> In 2008, the Home Office launched an exercise to clear a backlog of an estimated 400,000-450,000 unresolved asylum cases.

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