

## Refugees' Social Trajectories and Trajectories of the Self

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**Abstract:** The focus of this article is on refugee's social integration in the receiving country. It examines how refugee ethno-social preferences and practices fluctuate and develop. The primary goal is to explore how post-resettlement social trajectories are linked to changes in identities. It is argued here that ethno-social practices and identities of refugees need to be seen in the light of their migration biographies, everyday experiences, and anticipated futures. The findings in the article have important methodological implications in terms of the methodological potential offered by biographical narratives as a tool in gathering qualitative data. In demonstrating the advantages and weaknesses of biographical narratives, the article is of relevance not only to researchers, but also to social workers and other service providers who work in the field of social integration and who can use this approach to map out the social life of each refugee.

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## 1. Introduction

There is a vast body of contemporary research that focuses on life in reception centers for asylum seekers, the everyday life of refugees, and refugee' repatriation plans. Challenges of life in exile, such as problems relating to discrimination, exclusion and marginalization of asylum seekers and refugees are some of the themes that fall within the scope of such studies (BREKKE, 2004; VALENTA, 2008). Some of these studies conclude that refugees experience stigmatization in everyday life which may lead to withdrawal from social relationships with the host society (PORTES & RUMBAUT, 2006; VALENTA, 2009a). Studies have also shown that immigrants and refugees dream about returning to their home country (AL-RASHEED, 1994; STEFANSSON 1998;

BREKKE, 2001; EASTMOND, 2006), which may reduce their motivation to integrate into the host society. [1]

There is also a vast corpus of migration literature and biographical research already published in *FQS* which focuses on the interplay between the past and the present as well as on the nexus of intra-biographical developments and identities of belonging, social life and anticipated future (BRANDHORST, 2009; GRÜN, 2009; KÖTTIG, CHAITIN, LINSTROTH & ROSENTHAL, 2009; KÜVER, 2009; ZINN, 2010).<sup>1</sup> By linking the pool of knowledge drawn from the literature on refugees and the biographical research, this article contributes to the field in two ways. Firstly, the article shows how refugees social trajectories and identities develop and interact with their memories of life in reception centers, their current daily experience of bridging to the mainstream, and their repatriation plans. Secondly, the findings in the article have important methodological implications by demonstrating the functional potential of narratives as a tool for gathering qualitative data from refugees. [2]

This article is based on data collected from 40 refugees from Iraq, Bosnia and Croatia who resettled in Norway in the late 1990s. However, the article does not focus on the Norwegian experience in the context of societal reception, or on how different ethnic groups position themselves in relation to the mainstream. The focus is placed on certain socio-psychological aspects of life in exile, including how refugee ethno-social preferences, practices, and identities fluctuate and develop over longer periods of time. In short, the article aims to examine how trajectories of the self interact with social trajectories among people in exile. The research questions are: How do refugees relate their self-work and ethno-social behavior to their past and present, and anticipated future self? Are there common features in refugee identity development and ethno-social practice? Indeed, as will be shown, refugee trajectories of the self, and their social trajectories share certain features in common. [3]

The theoretical framework for this analysis has been influenced by, conventional symbolic interactionist theory with its central focus on the interactional self and on self-worth arising out of face-to-face interactions. It is also inspired by GIDDENS (1991) who relates the self to the actor's anticipated future. In the empirical/analytical section of the article, some of these well known concepts will be elaborated upon and modified for the purpose of my exploration. Amongst other things, I emphasize the merits of GIDDENS' idea that the sense of "who we are" is connected to our ideas about who we were in the past and where we are going in the future (GIDDENS, 1991). In line with GIDDENS' view, it is assumed that refugees reconstruct the past and modify the anticipated future in order to achieve a better fit with present day actions. I call this "honoring the current interactional self." It is also held that a refugee may honor a formerly held concept of the self by selectively or strategically avoiding interactions and relationships that could undermine or even contradict the validity of the former self-image. We could call this strategy "honoring the biographical self." Conversely, through a

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1 For other contributions on this topic see [FQS 10\(3\)](#) and [FQS 11\(1\)](#).

process of reverse engineering, the anticipated self may wield equal influence over current actions, leading to a reconstruction of past memories. The dream of the return, frequently discussed in migration studies (LUNDBERG, 1989; AL-RASHEED, 1994), can be called "honoring the anticipated self." [4]

## 2. Method

As part of a larger study which focused on immigrants and refugees' social integration and their self-work in everyday life, I undertook interviews with 40 refugees who resettled in Norway in the late 1990's. During the first stage of my sampling and selection of interviewees I tried to achieve variation within the data with respect to age, sex, family situation, marital status, place of residence and ethnicity. Most (28) of my informants have lived between 8 and 12 years in Norway. They originate from three countries: Twelve informants came from Croatia, 15 from Iraq and 13 from Bosnia. Thirty lived in Trondheim at the time of the interviews: the remainder lived in three small towns in Northern, Central and South-Eastern Norway. The oldest informant at the time the study began was 65, while the youngest was 17. Twenty-one are men, and nineteen are women. By comparing these categories I hoped to highlight differences and similarities with regards to the immigrants' biographies, social trajectories and experiences in mastering their everyday life. The immigrants (from the ex-Yugoslav republics and Iraq) were chosen because they represent some of the largest first generation immigrant groups in Norway. [5]

In order to explore how immigrants' ethno-social practices, identities and day-to-day reality developed and changed over time, I also followed several refugees over a long period of time. I did not have resources and opportunity to re-interview the whole group of 40 refugees. I re-interviewed the same refugees (nine informants) two or three times over a period of six years (at approximately two-year intervals). In this stage of my research, I used a combination of purposeful and theoretical sampling (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967; ALVESSON & SKÖLDBERG, 1994; MARSHALL, 1996; RITCHIE & LEWIS, 2003). Since I already knew the subjects, I was able to select them purposefully according to their different past and present, and anticipated future self. In other words I selected nine cases which were likely to illustrate my theoretically driven assumptions on refugees' social trajectories and the trajectories of the self. During the sampling and selection of these interviewees I also tried to achieve the same variation within the data as evident in the whole sample group, including the variations in age, sex, ethnicity and family situation. [6]

Inspired by ROSENTHAL (2004), I collected refugees' biographies using biographical narrative interviews which enabled me to construct a chronology of the refugee's life from their arrival to the present. The chronology included the person's experiences in life, such as life in a reception center, friendships, employment in Norway, family reunion, marriage and birth of children. The biographical case reconstruction was used in analysis of the interviews. This approach was successfully applied in analysis of biographical narratives (ROSENTHAL, 1993, 2004; CHAMBERLAYNE, BORNAT & WENGRAF, 2000;

MIETHE 2002; ZINN, 2010). ROSENTHAL (2004) suggests that the goal of biographical case reconstruction is to discern both the meaning of past experience and the meaning of self presentation in the present (ROSENTHAL, 2004, p.54). As MIETHE points out, this approach is based on the assumption that the view of the past is influenced by the present. It also assumes that the past perspectives differ from past experience, while past experience also affects the present (MIETHE, 2002, p.213). I followed these assumptions and suggestions, which seemed highly coherent with perspectives on "reflexive project of the self" proposed by GIDDENS (1991). Inspired by the GIDDENS' perspectives on a "trajectory of the self" (GIDDENS, 1991), I related these two traditional goals of biographical case reconstructions (ROSENTHAL, 2004), to the meaning of "the anticipated future" (GIDDENS, 1991, p.75). [7]

I started with the analysis focusing on the structure and content of informants' narrated stories which helped me to identify some general patterns and extraordinary experiences in their chronological accounts. Afterwards, I related the patterns and topics identified in the interview material to those presented by the same informants in the previous interviews. On this basis, it was possible to identify refugees' biographical reconstructions and the dynamic of their self-reinterpretations. [8]

I followed MAGOLDA's (2000) advice and wrote extensively about my preconceived notions about immigrants' social life and their day-to-day reality. This forced me to come to terms with my personal experiences and stereotypes. It also enabled me to engage in the process of identifying, acknowledging, and seeking out my subjectivity, a practice I continued throughout the study. Additionally, I constantly questioned my selections of certain leads and whether or not to follow up on them. I tried to identify several themes and topics across the interview material (such as those related to interconnections between refugees' self-work and ethno-social behavior). In order to make the analytical process more systematic, the interview transcriptions were coded and classified. Collected data was constantly broken down into themes and analytical categories. The coding ranged from open coding to axial and selective coding (STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1998; CHARMAZ, 2006). By reducing the data material in this way, I developed a better overall picture of my data material. By identifying themes and categories, I could more easily confront and compare comparative and contrasting cases. [9]

The analysis of my empirical data was mostly characterized by abduction where I continuously oscillated between theory and the empirical data I gathered. The process of analysis usually began in an inductive manner, but gradually became more deductive when theoretical concepts were used in order to interpret the data. Concurring with COFFEY and ATKINSON (1996) who maintain that data analysis should not be seen as a distinct last phase of research, I considered the analysis of my material as a reflexive, cyclical activity that was in simultaneous interplay with data collection, coding, writing, and further data collection. During this process, my meanings, interpretations and conclusions were saturated and

working hypotheses emerged. Through further data collection, they were coded, verified, modified and contrasted with other methods of data collection. [10]

This continuous oscillation between the gathering and analysis of data contributed to the flexibility of the whole research process. I collected and analyzed refugees' biographies about the reconstruction of their social life in Norway from their arrival to the present. However, this strategy was not originally planned. In the beginning, the interviews focused on refugees' current social relations and how they were linked to their identities of belonging in relation to the mainstream. The interviews showed that immigrants' existing experience of day-to-day reality (for instance, feelings of stigma and misrecognition or a sense of belonging/non-belonging to the mainstream society) was closely related to different aspects of their personal social network. However, during the analysis of the interview transcripts I indicated that the experiences and meanings presented by some interviewees deviated from a main pattern: Several transcripts indicated that refugees' explained this discrepancy by referring to their earlier relations with Norwegians, saying that these relations helped them feel accepted. Although they may not have Norwegian friends now, they had them before. Until this finding, most of my coding and interviews were two-dimensional. One part of the interview and the subsequent coding procedure focused on refugees' everyday experiences while another part focused on the existing social relations and networks. [11]

I gradually acknowledged that I had to relate refugees' day-to-day-reality to their past and their anticipated future. In order to get a glimpse into the refugees' various "social integration careers," I modified my interviews and my coding of the interview transcripts. In later stages, the questions in interviews and analysis focused on the interplay between the past and the present as well as the intra-biographical developments with respect to refugees' social life and identities. I began the formal interviews by asking interviewees to give me a chronological story of their networking and experiences after resettlement in Norway. When these narratives had reached the present time, the focus of interview shifted toward exploring the informants' everyday experiences, and the meanings they attached to them. As the interviews evolved, my focus gradually moved toward my informants' anticipated future, integration hopes, repatriation plans, etc. This procedure was used each time I met the refugees (at approximately two-year intervals). This enabled me to identify themes and topics across the interview material, compare informants' narratives about the past, and indicate cases where they engaged in reconstructions of their biographic self. [12]

### **3. Symbolic Interactionism, Refugees' Social Relations and the Trajectory of Self**

According to MEAD (1962 [1934]) the acting and unconscious part of the self is in constant alternation in ongoing conduct with the observing and conscious part. The symbolic interactionist theory, which departs from Mead's seminal notions, has often been used in explorations of immigrants' social life. These studies link immigrants and refugees' self-work to their day-to-day reality and networks (HØGMO, 1997; MARVASTI, 2005; VALENTA, 2009b). In my view, we should go

one step further and acknowledge that the interactions between the current identities, self-work and ethno-social practices cannot be seen as isolated from their ongoing self-redefinitions with references to the past and anticipated future. Refugees' reconstruction of social life and identity work interact and evolve over time. I believe that the mutuality and tensions that characterize the relation between Mead's creative "I" and the reflective "me" also exist in the relation between refugees' self-images of the past (biographic self), their current identity deployment and their desires and anticipations of who they will be in the future (anticipated self). [13]

In order to place intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of refugees' social life into a more comprehensive time-frame, the conventional symbolic interactionist theory has to be extended. Here, we may again draw on GIDDENS' theory. According to GIDDENS, we are constantly involved in a "reflexive project of the self" and a "trajectory of the self" (GIDDENS, 1991). GIDDENS argues that the process of 'monitoring' is at the core of our reflexivity. According to GIDDENS, people are engaged in continually monitoring their own actions and the actions of others. These activities necessitate reflecting upon what has happened and anticipating what might happen in the future. As GIDDENS (1991) points out:

"The self forms a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future. The individual appropriates his past by shifting through it in the light of what is anticipated for an (organized) future...the reflexive construction of self-identity depends as much on preparing for the future as on interpreting the past, although the 'reworking' of the past events is certainly always important in this process" (pp.75-85). [14]

According to GIDDENS, we cannot take our identities for granted. In a dynamically changing and diverse modern society, identity is achieved rather than ascribed. In the practical conduct of everyday life, people avoid the dangers that may undermine their self-identity. Our actions and identities are constructed and reconstructed through reflexive interactions with ourselves and other people. They are fragile and therefore they have to be constantly worked, examined and refashioned in everyday life. The outcome is a trajectory of the self, a dynamic interplay between the past, present and an anticipated future:

"Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography. Identity here still presumes continuity across time and space: but self-identity is such continuity as interpreted reflexively by the agent" (p.53). [15]

In line with these ideas, I ask whether refugees' (self) understandings of the past, present and anticipated future are in a multiple dialectic relationship. If we apply GIDDENS' notions to the relation between self-work and ethno-social practice, we may assume that refugees' social integration trajectories are in close relation to their trajectories of the self. Accordingly, we may assume that refugees are actively engaged in identity constructions where their self-understanding and their definitions of relation with the host society and with the immigrant community are constantly worked and reworked through daily ethno-social practices (VALENTA,

2009b). Reconstructions of experiences of belonging and recognition, as well as stigmatization and exclusion, which are frequently discussed in migration studies (MARVASTI, 2005; KÖTTIG et al., 2009; VALENTA, 2009b), may be here understood as part of a refugee's "trajectory of the self" (GIDDENS, 1991). [16]

For example, we may assume that the favorable self-image (of belonging, recognition and inclusion) that refugees have achieved in the past would be maintained through strategic action in the present. Successful bridging in the present may contribute to changing old biographies and identities of exclusion, while their old experiences of discrimination and stigmatization may make refugees reluctant to make new contacts with indigenous locals (VALENTA, 2009b). An equivalent assumption may be proposed in respect to the interaction between the present and the anticipated future. If refugees anticipate that integration requirements are unreasonably high, and that there are possibilities for rejection by the hosts, this anticipated future outcome may influence their present inclination for ethnic bridging. In a similar fashion, we may assume that repatriation plans reduce refugees' inclination for social incorporation into the mainstream, as is proposed in several studies (LUNDBERG, 1989; BREKKE, 2001; VALENTA, 2008), while satisfaction with their current social life in Norway may make them change these plans. In what follows, aforementioned assumptions are linked together and explored. [17]

#### **4. Oscillating Between the Biographical Self, the Interactional Self and the Anticipated Self**

The current self-understanding that refugees have, and how they interpret their relations with others, both have inherent reference points in the past and future. In this respect, my informants were especially preoccupied with: a) the memories they had of their time in Norwegian reception centers, b) the anticipations about incorporation into Norwegian society, and c) with the dreams they had about a possible future return to and repatriation to their homeland. [18]

Most of my 40 informants lived for 1-2 years in Norwegian reception centers for asylum seekers and refugees before they were granted residence permits and were able to settle in local municipalities. This period of life is generally experienced as problematic. The reception center was primarily remembered as the place where they were exposed to various humiliations. During their stay in such places, relations between refugees, indigenous locals and Norwegian authorities were generally full of tension, conflict and mistrust.<sup>2</sup> When they came to Norway, most of my informants had to struggle to convince the Norwegian authorities that they were in need of protection. This can be a quite humiliating process, which may involve medical examinations, fingerprint samples, body measurements, police interviews, as well as communication with lawyers, and the possibility of rejections and appeals. These experiences have been firmly deposited in the memories of several of my informants. One Iraqi man said:

2 Several studies (SOLHEIM, 1990; VALENTA, 2001; BREKKE & VEVSTAD, 2007) have pointed out that the everyday interactions in the reception center resemble GOFFMAN's descriptions of total institutions (GOFFMAN, 1961).

"Norwegian authorities treated us like we were criminals. Nobody believed us ... The police used to come in the mornings and afternoons to collect people whose applications had been rejected for the last time. Sometimes they handcuffed them ... We were so naive. Once, we believed that we would be treated as heroes in the West because we were against Saddam ... Before we arrived here we thought of Norway as a democratic country. We believed that Norwegians were altruistic people. After all these humiliations, these impressions of Norway and of Norwegians have changed" (Iraqi man). [19]

Immediately after their arrival in the receiving society, newcomers hope that they will gain acceptance and recognition from their hosts (KNUDSEN, 2005). In instances where newcomers construct negative stereotypes about indigenous locals during their stay in reception camps, the initial inclination for bridging to the mainstream may diminish (VALENTA, 2001; KNUDSEN, 2005). For the above informant, it took a long time before he forgot and suppressed these negative first impressions of Norway and of indigenous locals. Even in cases where individuals were quickly granted a residence permit, they may still have experienced many instances where the applications of friends were rejected, and where they were then collected by the police, and sent back home. These situations may be dramatic and give rise to strong emotions (VALENTA, 2008). Such episodes may contribute to negative constructions of Norwegians. However, they are just one among several possible negative first impressions immigrants may get of Norway and Norwegians. I have also met refugees with distinctive characteristics which influenced their life in the reception center and their relations with Norwegians. For instance, some newcomers managed to profile themselves as representatives for resident groups: they were used as translators, and they served as arbitrators in the various conflicts between other residents, etc. What these individuals had more or less in common was that they regained control over their lives and felt respected both by the staff in the reception center and by the Norwegian local community. In these cases, the initial encounters with indigenous locals did not contribute to bitterness and the construction of a strongly stigmatized identity in the early stages of their arrival. Consequently, these people were less skeptical about future ethnic bridging with Norwegians. They have primarily experienced the reception center as a place of learning, where they were prepared for resettlement and life in Norway. Optimism about the prospects for social integration was still quite high among these people in the period when they left the reception camp and were given a flat of their own by local municipalities. [20]

#### **4.1 Refugees' stories**

In what follows I present three stories. These stories show that relations between refugees and their compatriots, or between refugees and indigenous locals, may be stable or alter in several respects. The number of ties a person has may change and the intensity of relations may change. The stories refugees convey reveal how they define the importance of relations with indigenous locals and with their compatriots. The stories presented here serve as examples of how ethno-social practices and identities develop over time. They also illuminate how attempts at bridging with the mainstream may gradually dissipate. [21]



#### 4.1.1 *Rashid's story*

The first story is about Rashid, an Iraqi man who came to Norway in 1997.<sup>3</sup> I interviewed him for the first time in 2000. Rashid was 28 at the time, and single. He had a university education from his home country. I interviewed him again in 2003 and 2006. When I first spoke with Rashid in 2000, Rashid socialized with compatriots who had previously lived in the same reception center as him. He also spent a lot of his spare time with Norwegians. He became a member of a peace movement that mostly attracted Norwegian students. Rashid participated in meetings and demonstrations, but also developed friendships. He was invited to parties and trips, and slept over in their homes, etc. In 2000, Rashid also followed intensive courses in Norwegian and found part time employment as a mother tongue teacher at a local primary school. Rashid's social life was mostly spent with Norwegians. Bridging with the mainstream society was one of his main preoccupations. He expressed this concern directly in the course of the first interview, saying that one of the most important things for him was to get Norwegian friends and to be accepted and recognized by Norwegians as a normal person:

"I prioritize my Norwegian contacts. I have enough compatriot friends. They are also so preoccupied with the past and with the situation back home. I also worry about the situation in my homeland, but at the same time, I now live here in Norway. I also have to think about building a new life. Many of my compatriots do not have any contact with Norwegians. How can I feel a part of this society if I do not have any contact with Norwegians?" (Rashid) [22]

Rashid's integration attempts gradually led to incorporation within mainstream Norwegian society. Three years later, Rashid spoke fluent Norwegian and had his own flat, car and full-time job. He lived together with a Norwegian woman and had a child with her. They planned to have a second child. Rashid spent most of his spare time together with his family. However, he now spent the rest of his time with his compatriot friends, and not with Norwegians as before. Rashid had many Norwegian acquaintances, but he seldom socialized with them in his spare time. He socialized with Norwegian co-workers at the workplace only. They met and socialized almost exclusively within the frames defined by the workplace (on business trips, at seminars, during the Christmas dinner arranged by his employer, etc). Rashid had almost no contact with his Norwegian friends from the peace movement. In short, it seemed that Rashid has gradually reconstructed his relation to his compatriots. He said:

"During my first years in Norway, I was very interested in contacts with Norwegians. I had several compatriot friends, but I did not have Norwegian friends. I maybe had a need to prove to myself that Norwegians accepted me ... I am not as bothered about all that as I was before...Perhaps because I have proved to myself that they respect me. I live with a Norwegian woman and have a child with her ... I prefer to be with my

3 Some information in the story is changed. Certain information is irrelevant for us, but with the aid of minor adjustments, I may effectively disguise the informant's identity. I have done the same with other cases in the study.

compatriot friends ... In order to maintain my friendships with Norwegians from the peace movement; I have to participate at meetings, demonstrations, etc. I participate in demonstrations sometimes, but do not feel that I am a part of that milieu. I am more relaxed when I am together with my compatriots. I share more with my compatriots ... I have a lot of things in common with my compatriots" (Rashid). [23]

We may see from the story how relations with compatriots become more important for Rashid. Compatriots are prioritized both in terms of sociability, but also as significant and generalized others. This received its clearest expression, when Rashid discussed his dilemma about what name to give his second child. In these discussions, it seemed that he took the role of the ethnic community much more seriously than he had before. He was more concerned about the perspectives of his relatives and his compatriot friends. Whereas Rashid had previously even considered westernizing his last name, in order to "make it easier" for himself and his children in Norway, now he was no longer concerned with that problem. He felt quite confident in his connection to the mainstream. As Rashid himself puts it in the excerpt above, he has proved to himself that he was accepted and respected by indigenous locals. [24]

I interviewed Rashid twice in 2006. He still worked at the same place, and I had the impression that his social life had not changed dramatically since 2003. Rashid was still married. He spent most of his spare time with his family, busy with the task of restoring the new home he and his wife have bought. He was even more oriented to his compatriots than before. Rashid has lost contact with his former Norwegian friends and acquaintances (from the time he was primarily oriented to bridging with Norwegians). He had met and got to know many more Norwegians through his job, but these relations were uniformly defined by him as mere acquaintanceship. In other words, Rashid's efforts to bridge with the mainstream declined in terms of sociability. Nevertheless, Rashid still felt strongly anchored in the mainstream society. This development may be understood in the light of my distinction between biographic and interactional identity. Rashid's ethno-social preferences and practices have changed in the course of time, but his identity as someone who is accepted and respected by indigenous locals has remained stable. Rashid has always combined bonding and bridging. However, during the first years in Norway, he was more oriented toward ethnic bridging to the detriment of relationships with his compatriots. In this period, he primarily acquired his identity as someone who was accepted and respected by the locals in daily practice and through his interactional self. Later, he was more oriented towards his compatriots while the degree of ethnic bridging declined. Despite this, he remained, in his own eyes, sufficiently attached to the mainstream. Although Rashid has withdrawn from the mainstream (in the sense that there is little fraternization with Norwegians or socialization with indigenous locals during his spare time), he has reproduced his identity as someone who is accepted and respected by Norwegians. He maintains these constructions partly by honoring his biographical self. These idealized memories from the past are supported by means of a select few relations with Norwegians who appear to him as symbols of acceptance. The fact that he is married with a Norwegian woman is the prominent factor here. [25]

#### 4.1.2 Goran and Mira's story

My second case illuminates patterns where immigrants initially lose any inclination to bridge with the host, but then regain it. This story serves as a good example of how immigrants continuously reconstruct their past and anticipated future to fit better with their current ethno-social practice. The case features Goran and Mira, a Croatian couple who came to Norway in 1998. I interviewed them for the first time in 2000, and again three years later, in 2003. The last interview was conducted in 2006. When I first spoke with Goran and Mira, they mostly socialized with other people from Croatia and Bosnia who lived in the town, but they were also in touch with two Norwegian families who they considered friends of theirs and with whom they spent a considerable amount of their spare time. Although they still lived in the reception center at that time, they were optimistic about their prospects of social integration in Norway. [26]

When I did the follow-up interview with the couple in 2003, they had their own flat and car, and worked in relatively well-paid jobs. They appeared well integrated in Norwegian society. However, they no longer had any friendships with Norwegians. Goran and Mira complained that they never managed to establish satisfying social relations with Norwegians. They felt that the relationships they had with them were not based on mutuality. They were in general disappointed with their Norwegian contacts:

"We had Norwegian friends who we often invited home. They used to visit us and we had a nice time with them, but they seldom invited us to visit them back, so we just stopped inviting them. After that, we visited each other quite seldom. ... Since we now live far away from each other, we do not have much contact with them any more ... Our general impression is that it is too difficult to mobilize Norwegians. Everything has to be arranged several weeks in advance ... They are distanced. It is difficult to know whether they behave in such way only with us or not" (Mira).

"We are not youngsters anymore and it is not easy to adjust to all that ... It is much easier with our people. They just drop in, drink a cup of coffee and go ... We do not invest energy in relations with Norwegians any more. We do not socialize with Norwegians in our spare time... We have contact with Norwegians at work, and this is enough ... We will never be part of this society ... When we are in our home country, people are different. They are more social. We meet people who know us all the time" (Goran). [27]

As their account suggests, Goran and Mira had given up the idea that they would be fully integrated in the mainstream society by the time of the second interview. The initial optimism they expressed when I first met them gradually diminished. They were quite pessimistic about their future social integration into the Norwegian society and expressed strong feelings of non-belonging. Both were dissatisfied with their life in Norway, and especially with their social life. They felt lonely. They were also giving serious consideration to returning to their homeland. When asked if they anticipated that the quality of their social life would improve in future, the answer was "yes," because in a few years time they would no longer

be living in Norway. They thought that they would repatriate in 4-5 years, when they had saved enough money. [28]

When I interviewed Goran and Mira again in 2006, they had adopted a much more optimistic stance to ethnic bridging. This change may have been brought about by the fact that they had established satisfying and friendly relations with a Norwegian family. These people were the parents of their children's friends. They introduced Goran and Mira to other Norwegians in the neighborhood. This time, Goran and Mira were happy with their new friends. These relations were experienced as mutual, based on reciprocal respect. Since the last interview, Goran and Mira had also become more familiar with the Norwegian language and cultural expectations. In addition, they felt that their ethnic identity was seen in a more positive light by the locals. As a result, they received more gratifying feedback in their interactions with Norwegians. Goran mentioned that they planned to spend time together in Croatia with their Norwegian friends.

"Now, Norwegians know much more about Croatia. Before, Croatia and Kosovo were the same for them ...The situation has changed; people ask us all the time about advice about where to go in Croatia. When people meet us they say how beautiful it is down there. I look forward to spending summer vacation with our friends. It is better to be with Norwegians. Our people are jealous and like to gossip ... We have had Norwegian friends since we arrived in Norway ... We were accepted easily since we decided beforehand to adjust to the new environment (Goran). [29]

While he expresses discontent with his compatriots, Goran also reflects on the rewarding nature of his contact with Norwegians. The current situation where Goran and Mira are accepted and respected in Norway has replaced their old pessimism about their relations to the mainstream society. The couple's general sentiments about Norwegians and compatriots have been redefined, compared to the stance they took in 2003. This account shows a different set of ethno-social preferences, with Goran and Mira now seeing ethnic bridging and adjustment to the mainstream as something affirmative. We can also see how the couple gradually started to reconstruct their biographical selves. They adjusted their old identities of non-belonging in order to fit better with their new ethno-social practices, and to reflect the sense they now had of belonging and being accepted by the mainstream. The new sentiments that the informants express here also influence their anticipated future in the homeland. The plans to repatriate were not emphasized as strongly as they had been when we last met. Goran and Mira have not abandoned these plans completely, but they were now less concrete. Their ideas about life in their home country were more abstract and distant, to such an extent that Mira has said that they will perhaps return after they have retired. [30]

#### *4.1.3 Ali's story*

The story that follows demonstrates how refugees can cope with continuous ethnic segregation and stigmatization through a constant reconstruction of their self-images. The subject in this case is Ali, an Iraqi man who came to Norway in 1998. I interviewed him for the first time in 2000. He was interviewed again in

2002, 2004 and (for the last time) in 2006. The first time I spoke with Ali, he lived in the reception center. He was highly respected among the Iraqi residents, and by staff at the reception center. He had a university education and could speak English. He often assisted as a translator and intermediary in everyday interactions between staff and Iraqi residents. He had positive impressions of Norwegians and Norwegian society. At that time, Ali did not have any Norwegian friends, but he wished to be better known with Norwegians. It was his opinion that his current situation was a temporary one. He said:

"It would be nice to have some Norwegian friends. Maybe it will be easier to get Norwegian friends when we get jobs and when our Norwegian proficiency improves. Now, we do not have the chance to meet and get acquainted with Norwegians. When we get a proper apartment and work, we will have more possibility for contact with Norwegian neighbors and Norwegian work colleagues" (Ali). [31]

Ali had optimistic expectations about his future bridging with the mainstream and with the possibility of fuller integration within Norwegian society. When I interviewed Ali for the second time, in 2002, he still did not have any personal relationships with Norwegians. Ali's sentiments about Norwegians had changed, and had become negative. It later emerged that he had endured a difficult time over the last year. Among other things, the Norwegian authorities had refused his application to be reunited with his family, with the result that his wife and children were refused entry to the country. After a long, costly and psychically exhausting fight with the authorities, Ali was eventually reunited with his family and they now live together. However, he was deeply disappointed with Norwegians. It was very apparent that he no longer shared his initial optimism about and eagerness for bridging with Norwegians. [32]

When I interviewed Ali again in 2004, he worked as a taxi driver. It seemed that the negative memories of life in the reception camp and of his struggles with restrictive asylum policies were no longer as important to him. However, Ali did not have any Norwegian friends, either at work or in his spare time. Unlike our last meeting, when he lacked the motivation for bridging with Norwegians, Ali now claimed that he would like to have Norwegian friends. But in his view, it was not he, but the Norwegians who were not interested.

"People say that we have to take the initiative if we want to get Norwegian friends. I have done that, for example, I have invited Norwegians to dinner ... Some people say that they will come, but they never do ... They have not shown any interest. This society is not open to foreigners. Norwegians think that they are superior in everything ... I have to defend myself all the time, to say that I am not the way that they think that Iraqis and Muslims are ... Since we came here, I have made many Iraqi friends, close friends ... I do not expect that I will get close Norwegian friends in the future. I know people who have been here much longer than I have and they do not have any Norwegian friends" (Ali). [33]

While Ali's ethno-social preferences and his self-identification as someone who does not belong were clearly connected to the problems he had had with Norwegian

authorities in the past, this time, they were linked to his daily experiences and anticipated future. Previously, the lack of contact was understood as a temporary situation, but now anticipated that this social segregation would remain permanent. During the interview, Ali also expressed his wish to return to Northern Iraq. Such a possibility was rejected in earlier interviews, but he now claimed that he had never ruled out this alternative in his plans for the future. [34]

When I interviewed Ali for the last time in 2006, his social life was still based on relations with his compatriots. He continued to speak about returning to his homeland, but his plans were postponed again. He was more content with life in Norway. It seemed that he had moderated some of his sentiments about Norwegians. Previously, Ali had felt excluded and had less than optimistic expectations about the possibility of being more fully integrated in Norwegian society. This time, his segregation was not seen as a result of rejection by the host. Whereas Norwegians had been described before as intolerant, arrogant and almost hostile, this time, Ali took a more conciliatory and moderate stance.

"I never felt that Norwegians hated us or discriminated against us. It is normal that certain misunderstandings will occur. I think that if they moved to my country that they would experience much bigger problems ... We have our preferences and they have theirs. This does mean that we disrespect each other. It is not strange that we prefer to be with our compatriots and they with theirs. They have their language and culture and we have ours" (Ali). [35]

Ali's interpretation of his social life may be seen in the light of his identity work. His earlier self-understanding was dominated, among other things, by negative experiences from the past, by his dream about returning, and by fluctuating anticipations about incorporation into the mainstream. The dream about returning was still part of Ali's anticipated self. He still saw his life in Norway as a temporary stage. He traced the origins of his social segregation to his own preferences and choices. Ali claimed that if he wanted to socialize with indigenous locals, he could get Norwegian friends, but he prefers his own people. As he stated, "if I planned to live here forever, I am sure that I would be more motivated to get Norwegian friends." This time, Ali's current self-understanding and reconstructed biographical self also included a suppression of the problems that he had experienced in the past and present. During the interview, I got the impression that the informant wanted to convince himself and the people around him that he was not the victim of exclusion and discrimination. Ali tried to see his social environment in a more positive light.<sup>4</sup> In short, Ali's construction was based on two images: first, that the society around him was not so hostile; and second, that his segregation is a result of his own choices. [36]

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4 For example, when encouraged to comment negative focus on Muslims in media and that xenophobic right wing parties are getting so strong support in Norway, he claimed that these sentiments are not representative, and that they should not necessarily be interpreted as result of xenophobia.

## 5. Social Trajectories and Trajectories of the Self

My data suggest that some refugees may be more highly motivated to integrate externally and to bridge with the mainstream immediately after their arrival in the host nation. Refugees may then feel that they have been given a fresh start and that everything is possible in their new life. However, the opportunities for getting in touch with Norwegians are limited. In the first period, they cannot speak the Norwegian language sufficiently well and do not have the possibility of participating in the various arenas of social life. As a result, they often depend more or less entirely on their ethnic network. We may say that for some refugees the first years after resettlement can be characterized by a pioneer spirit, which includes a great desire on their part to bridge with the majority population (and to integrate generally with the mainstream): at the same time, they often have few resources or opportunities for achieving these goals. Significant changes come about with the acquisition of greater proficiency in the language and culture of the majority, and increased participation within the different arenas of the host society (such as in the workplace, at school and during leisure activities). As a result, refugees are able to establish weak ties with members of the local indigenous population. Most of my informants have achieved these weak tie links with Norwegians after they have lived 3-5 years in Norway. [37]

The inclination to bridge seems to flatten out with time. Compared to earlier periods when the incentive for external integration may be higher than the ability to make it happen, refugees may give up their desire to be more sociable with members of the majority population (even though they have an increased capacity and opportunity for doing so). The cases presented above show that several interpretations can be offered for, and several identities conferred on, this apparently paradoxical pattern of behavior. It seems that different people attached different meanings to their behavior and their social trajectories. Even if they appear to have very similar patterns in the ways that their social lives are reconstructed after resettlement, the refugees seem to relate their ethno-social preferences to different experiences and anticipations. In some cases, reduced inclination for bridging may be explained by tensions embedded in interactions and relations with other people. One Bosnian woman said:

"I remember the time when all of us wanted to have at least one Norwegian friend or couple. We were so eager to integrate and to belong somewhere, to be anchored in Norway. We socialized with Norwegians as much as possible ... Compared with the situation before when we almost exclusively socialized with Norwegians, we now spend more time with our compatriots and other foreigners ... We feel that we are sufficiently well integrated in Norwegian society ... We feel that we may allow ourselves to do that. Before, we were primarily concerned with adjustment and integration" (Bosnian women). [38]

When one's desired identity is accepted and recognized by the hosts, then the motivation for further external integration may, paradoxically, decrease. As the informant puts it in the excerpt above, refugees may indeed reduce their contact with the mainstream when they feel properly established and anchored within the

host society. However, this does not mean that refugees withdraw completely into their own ethnic communities. Although the frequency of interaction is drastically reduced, at least some of the old acquaintances with hosts will be maintained. As GIDDENS (1991) suggests, interpreting one's own biography and path of development from the past through the present to the anticipated future is an inherently fragile process which has to be continuously redefined. Relations with natives have to be maintained because refugees cannot live forever on their old victories. Maintaining a certain self-conception also requires continuous work in the present (GIDDENS, 1991). On the other hand, refugees may still feel accepted and recognized by the hosts even though they spend less and less time with them and more and more time with their compatriots. In order to preserve and replenish these feelings, it may be enough to keep up a few relations with hosts, even if the refugees socialize only occasionally with them (VALENTA, 2009a). [39]

As suggested in the refugees' narratives presented in this article, there may also be refugees who would say that it is not *them*, but the *hosts* who are the main hindrance to a fuller incorporation within Norwegian networks. Refugees may be disappointed with the feedback they get from Norwegians. If they have experienced several rejections, they may modify their bridging expectations. They may instead start to invest energy in compensatory bonding within their own group, the social environment that provides them with a sense of belonging, mutual commitment, intimacy and positive affirmation. Indeed, most of the refugees I have met, end up with weak connections to the Norwegian networks. The difference is that some of them will say that this is what they preferred, while others will claim that it was impossible to achieve a fuller incorporation into primary Norwegian groups. [40]

## 6. Relation to the Mainstream and Plans for Return in the Future

The process of social integration undergone by refugees after resettlement is indirectly related to their emotional attachment to their country of origin and their anticipations about future return. There are several perspectives on how immigrants relate their self to their homelands and to the country that receives them. They may be seen as people who transmigrate, living dual lives and maintaining homes in both countries (LEVITT, 2001; CARLING, 2008; VERTOVEC, 2009). The opposite argument is that immigrants and refugees lose their cultural identity and connection with their country of origin in the receiving country (GORDON, 1964). They may also be seen as people who live "neither here nor there"—in a state of limbo, in other words (VALENTA, 2008). [41]

Furthermore, it seems that people who anticipate a long stay in the receiving country will be more motivated to invest energy in relating to this society than those who plan a shorter stay. Refugees who are determined to return will normally pursue activities that are oriented to their home country. These people take the attitude that their present situation is little more than a short disruption in their lives, and that their stay outside the home country is a temporary one. This attitude may reduce their efforts to integrate into the receiving country. They focus less on the things that happen around them in the present, and more on a



continuing idea of themselves as unwillingly and impermanently absent from life in their home country. [42]

As the cases of Ali, Goran and Mira show, the people in my study went through several of these states or oscillated between them. My findings show that the same person's relation to the home country and to the receiving country may shift during a relatively short time. There are some periods and situations where the immigrant honors and glorifies the idea of returning to the home country to the detriment of becoming more attached to the receiving country: in other periods and situations, the same person can glorify Norway and Norwegians to the detriment of attachment with compatriots and the home country. These oscillations between honoring of the biographical and the anticipated self also lead to equivalent reconstructions of their personal biographies. For example, in the first interview Goran said: "We are not youngsters anymore and it is not easy to adjust to all that," while few years later he reconstructed his biography saying: "We were accepted easily since we decided beforehand to adjust to the new environment." Similarly, although Ali rejected ideas about return in earlier interviews, he later claimed that he had never ruled out this alternative in his plans for the future. [43]

People continually reorder their self-identity against the backdrop of the shifting experiences of everyday life (GIDDENS, 1991, p.186). It seems that how refugees relate to the host society and to their home country is indirectly affected by their current experiences and by the level of satisfaction or discontent with the present situation in the host country. There are times in their daily lives when refugees benefit from social inclusion and recognition by indigenous locals. These daily experiences may contribute to making Norway a place where a person feels at home. This current identity, composed of a sense of belonging, inclusion and recognition, may motivate immigrants to continue participating in the context of the host country to the detriment of "the dream of return." In other periods, an individual may be dissatisfied with work and friends in Norway, and feel unrecognized and excluded. At such times when the individual's disaffection with the receiving society is at its peak, the yearning after the home country and a possible return may dominate. As Ali's case demonstrates, dissatisfaction with their present life may make some immigrants re-initiate ideas of a return-that-solves-everything, where they contrast their current social problems in Norway with a nostalgic picture of the old home. In re-initiating these plans, refugees also re-initiate the comforting idea that their current life in Norway is just a temporary state, preparatory to their "big return." [44]

## **7. Conclusion**

This article shows that refugees fight continuously on several fronts in order to facilitate more compatible references for self-interpretation. On the one hand, refugees cope continuously in their everyday lives with interactions and relations in the way that they reproduce and confirm the positive or desirable aspects of their previously established self. On the other hand, as self-monitoring actors, refugees modify via constant and reflexive self-examination the self they have

established in the past to fit in with existing actions and with their anticipated future (see GIDDENS, 1991). As we have seen from the stories presented in this article, the trajectories of the self are closely linked with refugees' ethno-social preferences and practices. For example, when feelings of belonging and recognition by the mainstream are achieved, the motivation for more intensive sociability with indigenous locals may lessen. Having achieved a measure of security in their new environment, refugees may start to focus more on becoming sociable with their compatriots again. In such cases, having an identity which is respected and accepted by the mainstream is not primarily nourished via daily interactions, but through a worship of the past and an adequate construction of the biographical self. These changes are also linked to the transitions and different phases immigrants go through in their lives, as they establish families, become employed, etc. Nevertheless, the impact of these developments was somewhat understated in the narratives of my informants. Their social trajectories were mainly understood in the light of minority-majority relations and a sense of marginality and non-belonging to the mainstream. [45]

I have argued that the bridging and bonding of refugees is not only related to their past and present, but also closely linked to their anticipated self. We may distinguish between at least two types of anticipations that have an impact on their inclination to bridge with the mainstream: those linked to their repatriation plans and to the length of their stay in Norway, and others connected to hopes and anxieties about rejection or acceptance by the hosts. Refugees who are satisfied with their current life and are optimistic about integration in Norway are less likely to plan repatriation. And refugees who plan to return to their home country as soon as it is feasible may be less inclined to incorporate into the receiving society. [46]

To summarize: refugees' identities are in some cases reproduced with an emphasis on the interactional self, while in other cases they are mostly nourished by the past or anticipated future. In line with GIDDENS, I argued in this article that refugees have to deal with all three points of reference which may alter their biographical accounts. These findings have important methodological connotations. They demonstrate that refugees' biographical accounts should be taken into consideration when examining refugees' identities. Sense of belonging is not only propelled by current day-to-day experiences, but also by experiences and relationships they had in the past. However, interviewers who use this approach must have in mind that refugees' self-biographies are not fixed. Among other things, discrediting episodes from the past and repatriation plans may be suppressed in the light of current daily experiences. Therefore, they should be considered as accounts or versions of socially situated activities presented by interviewees. [47]

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