

‘The Word I Hate’: Racism, Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Iceland

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Abstract

Internationally, it has been well documented that refugees and asylum seekers are portrayed as one of Europe’s greatest threats, which intersects strongly with stereotypes about Muslim men. Our discussion focuses on asylum seekers in Iceland in 2015-2017 and their experiences of racism. The analysis shows that asylum seekers experienced racism in Iceland, but that this racism becomes overshadowed by their precarious position as asylum seekers.

Our analysis of racism and asylum seekers in Iceland is based on an intersectional perspective that stresses how racism has to be seen as existing in conjunction with other identifications and identities. In our case, the intersection of racism with the position of vulnerability is particularly important, i.e., the vulnerability that these individuals experience when categorized as asylum seekers. As we stress, the asylum seekers’ dismissal of racism signifies the intense insecurity that they live under and the structural violence that they become subjected to from state and border policies.

Keywords: Racism; asylum seekers; institutional racism.

Introduction

“You know, I hate this word, refugee, asylum seeker, because everyone should be free to live everywhere they want,” Raman said, adding that there is always a reason for people to flee their country. Always polite and soft spoken, his harsh words about his experience of being a refugee sounded out of character. His roommate had just finished expressing his frustration over the need to prove himself before the court and his identity being reduced to a case. Raman continued by explaining that, as a refugee, he felt that



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he was at the bottom of the migration hierarchy. "Refugee is very low; when they say refugee, asylum seeker, you are shy when walking the street".

Raman's awkwardness with these concepts does not come out of thin air. Scholars have demonstrated how refugees and asylum seekers are often portrayed as one of Europe's greatest threats, and while black African men are often seen as the embodiment of this threat (De Genova 2017; Oelgemöller 2017, 30-31), this conception intersects strongly with stereotypes about Muslim men (De Genova 2017; Fekete 2011; Kaya 2011). Even though in contemporary discussion we often see a strong emphasis on distinguishing between those who are supposedly real refugees from those who are not (Cannedy 2018), these two legal categories, asylum seeker and refugee, are often used interchangeably, along with referring to one, undifferentiated mass. Raman's hate of these concepts demonstrates clearly how these labels – that are essentially legal categories to clarify the rights people have under international law – become boxes they are trapped within. It also captures how these categories in fact often stand for people who are located outside the category of rights-bearing citizens (Balibar 2010, 319). As anthropologists have shown, those subjects seen as deserving of international protection are the suffering subjects (Fassin & d'Halluin 2005) that postulates a certain image with which asylum seekers have to comply.

In our discussion, we focus on precarity and racism against asylum seekers in Iceland. Along with the other Nordic countries, Iceland has for a long time been seen as existing outside of the history of colonialism and thus racism. This conception has actively been refuted by scholars focusing on the Nordic countries for the last decade (Loftsdóttir & Jensen 2012; Mulinari et al. 2009; Lundström 2014). Our analysis follows perspectives that emphasize the need to understand racism within a particular historical context where racism intersects with somewhat localized histories and meanings (Essed & Trienekens 2008; Garner 2006; Loftsdóttir 2017).

Racism, as scholars have demonstrated for some time, changed after the Second World War when open references to biological inferiority were seen as outdated with an increasing focus on culture or religion as a source of exclusion and prejudice (Balibar 2007). Just as racism has always involved reference to non-biological aspects, emphasising aspects associated with culture similarly slips into biological references (Harrison 2002; Loftsdóttir 2017). In the discussion here, we show that asylum seekers have experienced racism in Iceland but that this racism is, to some extent, overshadowed by their precarious position as asylum seekers.

Our analysis of racism towards asylum seekers in Iceland is based on an intersectional perspective, which stresses how racism has to be seen as existing in conjunction with other identifications and identities (Anthias 2012; Crenshaw 1991). In our case, the intersection of racism with the position of vulnerability is particularly important, i.e., the vulnerability that these individuals experience when categorized as asylum seekers. As we stress, the asylum seekers' dismissal of racism signifies the intense insecurity that they live under and the structural violence that they become subjected to from state and border policies. The interviews were taken for the most part in 2015 and 2016.

In the first part of the paper, we briefly outline our general view on racism and asylum seekers, followed by contextualizing our discussion within an overview of contemporary and historical racism in Iceland. We then present our analysis of governmental and public discourses surrounding asylum seekers in Iceland until 2017, when the research ended. In spite of referring to different legal categories, the words asylum seeker and refugee are often conflated in popular and political thought, so our discussion unavoidably includes presentations of both refugees and asylum seekers. Lastly, we move towards the experiences of the asylum seekers themselves. Our conclusion is that the asylum seekers in the study felt boxed within a category that they desired to escape. For them, racism was not the primary concern. Rather, their precarious position as asylum seekers was foremost. Racism, while certainly existing in Iceland, is thus overshadowed by the precarity of being an asylum seeker. Furthermore, racism becomes a problem to them when they fear that it is institutionalized.

1. Racializing Asylum Seekers and Refugees

With biological references becoming largely unacceptable in the post-World War II era, current expressions of racism in Europe and North America are characterized by references to cultural or religious differences (Balibar 2007; Lentin 2014). To capture this dimension of racism, scholars sometimes refer to “cultural racism” (Wren 2001), “neo-racism” (Balibar 2007) or “xeno-racism” (Fekete 2001). Racism has historically always involved inconsistent and multiple intersecting references to aspects perceived as biological and cultural, as can be seen in the long history of anti-Semitism in Europe (Balibar 2007). Thus, racism has always intersected with ideas of lineal development, modernization and aesthetics, while simultaneously intersecting with social classifications of gender, class and other variables (Loftsdóttir & Hipfl 2012). This makes racism, as an analytical concept, extremely difficult to define as not all forms of discrimination can be reduced to racism (Wade 2015, 15).

References to cultural differences in the present have multiple functions. First of all, they work to remove racist talk and practices from accusations of racism, which is a common feature of racism today (Balibar 2007; Loftsdóttir 2013). Importantly, they work to reinforce existing power structures by concealing actual reasons for poverty and social exclusion (Wren 2001). As Balibar (2007) has pointed out, arguments revolving around cultural differences essentially indicate that different groups cannot live together. The underlying belief is that the world can be divided into two groups of people, one group is modern and open and the other is backwards and closed. This, as mapped out by Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley (2012), has clearly been visible in current discussion about the “crisis of multiculturalism” in the UK and beyond. As Loftsdóttir (2011) demonstrates, the formulation of an Icelandic identity, or a European identity for that matter, includes a racialized visualization of whiteness as a normative category. In the case of asylum seekers and refugees, multiple dimensions of racism become clearly visible and, in this paper, we aim to convey how they apply specifically to asylum seekers and refugees.

Muslim immigrants and their descendants are often racialized in European discourse (Keskinen 2014), as well as homogenized as a group and posed as inherently different from Western culture and identity (Abu-Lughod 2002). Not only do the stereotypes they are associated with draw upon older forms of racism but also newer frameworks such as the clash of civilizations and “Muslim conspiracy theories” (Fekete 2011). These discussions often reproduce colonialist and Orientalist discourses (Keskinen & Andreasen 2017) where Muslims are simultaneously portrayed as a threat and belonging to a so-called backwards culture (Wren 2001). A similar discourse is also present in the general fear of the migrant, whether it is undocumented migrants, refugees, Muslims, non-Europeans or Hispanics (Ceyhan & Tsoukala 2002). Many asylum seekers come from Muslim countries and the two categories of asylum seeker and Muslim are increasingly conflated (Bhui 2016).

In the case of asylum seekers, racism intersects with other forms of discrimination towards them, such as their legal status as non-citizens, which normalizes their exclusion from society. “Anti-refugee discourse” paints those who seek asylum as “bogus, illegal immigrants and economic migrants scrounging at capital’s gate and threatening capital’s culture” (Fekete 2001, 23). Liz Fekete (2001) claims that asylum policies in Europe are constructed to deter people from seeking asylum rather than to ensure the protection of refugees. This has led to new forms of discrimination and the creation of an “ideological space in which racism towards asylum seekers becomes culturally acceptable” (Fekete 2001, 24).

Here, it is important to emphasize how racism is not only reflected in views or perspectives of individuals or groups, but is also reproduced through institutions and organizations. Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) stress that structures and policies do not need to have racist intentions to lead to racist outcomes. They look at institutional racism as a set of structures and practices that produce the exclusion of certain groups. In their analysis, racism is not seen as a unified system, but rather, as we have emphasized here, as a set of different types of racisms or praxes. What praxes have in common is that they work as modes of exclusion, subordination and exploitation.

Fox et al. (2012) similarly describe institutionalized racism as ‘exclusionary institutional practices, routines and cultures that both draw on and reproduce a logic of racialized difference’ (p. 684). In many cases of institutionalized racism, race is not explicitly mentioned in these policies or practices (Bailey et al. 2017, 1455). In our approach, we follow these definitions and see the emphasis on institutional racism as important in drawing attention to the facet that racism does not only revolve around the intentionality of different actors, as often is assumed in discussions of racism (Lentin 2016, 36), but in intersectionality of different structures and practices that, in effect, exclude certain racialized groups (Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1992; Fox et al. 2012).

The links between migration policies and racism have been stressed by a number of scholars (see e.g. Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1992; Fekete 2001; Fox et al. 2012; Schuster & Solomos 2004; van Dijk 1997; van Houtum 2010). Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992), for example, point out that the right to enter and stay in a country is based on inclusionary

and exclusionary criteria such as ethnic and racial categorization along with class and gender. European Union Policies have exempted European migrant workers from immigration control within the EU, while migrants from outside Europe are subjected to tighter immigration restrictions. Although this policy cannot be seen as based on racial preferences, the result is still racialized, with stricter visa and migration controls for people from poorer countries (Fox et al. 2012; Garner 2007; van Houtum 2010). Scholars have also argued that European externalization policies are constructed to keep asylum seekers out (Garner 2007; Hyndman & Giles 2011; Hyndman & Mountz 2008; Oelgemöller 2011). Oelgemöller (2011) and Hyndman and Mountz (2008) have criticized the European Union for rules on “safe third countries”, making it possible to externalize refugee claims. Although these practices can be viewed as exclusionary, they can also be exploitative (Mulinari & Neergaard 2017), working as a filter, which creates “certain types of subjects and subjectivities” (Anderson et al. 2009, 6).

Scholars have similarly criticized how the legitimate subject of international protection has, for the last decades, become the suffering subject, which makes the right to asylum a charitable obligation of different states (Fassin & d’Halluin 2005), where policies fluctuate between politics of pity and control (Fassin 2013). Additionally, the focus on victimhood minimizes the heterogeneity and agency of refugees and those seeking international protection. Humanitarian practices have, in this context, been criticized for silencing refugees and turning them into “pure victims in general” (Malkki 1996, 378), “object of inquiry” or a “problem to be solved” (Hyndman & Giles 2011, 367).

Kumsa (2006) has shown that, for many refugees, refugee status is not seen as something of which to be proud. In her study, many refugees wanted to leave their refugee status behind in order to become immigrants or citizens. The strong emphasis on the legitimacy of asylum claims has created a binary sense of illegal and legal claims, thus ignoring the right of people to seek protection in other countries as spelled out in the UN Refugee Convention (de Haas, Castles & Miller 2020, 31; Fassin & d’Halluin 2007). While asylum seekers and refugees are often analytically a category of migrants, they are not referred to as such by activists and scholars due to the fear of feeding into rhetoric of “illegal migrants” popularized in the media (see de Haas, Castles & Miller 2020, 32).

2. Methods and Analysis

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with twenty-eight individuals who all have experienced migration and seeking asylum in Iceland (see acknowledgements). The participants were twenty-three men and five women from ten countries. The low number of women in the group reflect the fact that fewer asylum seekers in Iceland are women. However, in 2016-2017, women (adult and female children) were on average about 25% of asylum seekers in Iceland (see Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir 2019, 51). The majority of the study participants came from the Middle East and Central Asia, ten come from Africa and two from Europe. The countries of origin do not represent the countries of origin of the majority of asylum seekers in Iceland.

Participants were recruited using the snowball sampling method. The interviews

were recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed. Interviews with twenty-one participants were conducted in English, with five other interviews occurring in the participants’ original language with the assistance of an interpreter. Furthermore, the first author conducted fieldwork in Iceland for six months by visiting asylum seekers and joining them in meetings with lawyers, protests and various kinds of gatherings concerning refugees and asylum seekers. In this article, the participants real names were not used and their countries of origin are not disclosed in order to protect their privacy. It has to be stressed that the smallness of Iceland as a society makes it necessary to present only minimal information about the participants.

The analysis also refers to a collection of online news articles from four Icelandic media outlets containing the words “asylum seeker” (is. *hælisleitandi*) or “refugee” (is. *flóttamaður*) from 2009 to 2017 and comments attached to those articles. While our interviewees were mainly asylum seekers, it was important to search for both terms as views toward these legal categories are often conflated as earlier mentioned. By using an online scraper to search for the words “asylum seeker” and “refugee” in news coverage and saving the articles and comments to a database, the first author built a database with 11,843 comments and 3,386 news articles. The four news media outlets analysed were *visir.is*, *dv.is*, *eyjan.is* and *utvarpsaga.is*.

Online comments and interactions allow for consolidating particular views, such as racist ones, where they are repeated over and over, giving them the aura of legitimacy along with constructing meaningful social categories (Virkki & Venäläinen 2020). The reason for choosing these four media outlets was that they all have comments attached to them, making it possible to analyse the connection between media and public discourse. The four have different reputations regarding to the subject matter analysed here, with *Útvarp Saga* being known for often expressing hostility toward asylum seekers and refugees. Possibly that shaped the results of the online scraping. Three other online news media outlets were excluded since they did not have comment sections at the time of the analysis.

The text from the scraped articles and comments was analysed with corpora analysis (Gabrielatos & Baker 2008), finding key words and phrases while analysing the discourse in the comments more closely using critical discourse analysis (Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000). Both the articles and comments were classified according to themes. The comments were further classified according to whether they displayed positive, negative or neutral attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers. In addition to news articles and comments, parliamentary speeches from 2002 to 2016 that contained references to asylum seekers and refugees were analysed using critical discourse analysis. The Act on Foreigners from 2002 and 2016 and its additional regulations from 2017 and 2018 were also analysed, along with the official reports from the state police. These official reports are important as they give insight into how, in official textual materials, asylum seekers are presented. These materials, i.e., the scraping of online articles and the analysis of official discourse, only contribute to a small part of the discussions and would need further analysis. Here, we prioritise the voices and experiences of the asylum seekers themselves.

In analysing this different data, we used discourse analysis to study how a particular discourse is used to assert power and hierarchy. We approach discourse from a critical perspective in line with Foucault's (1978) perspective on discourse as a social practice. Our discourse analysis is in conjunction with other ethnographic findings in this paper. We do not propose that the discourse necessarily reflects the opinion of the majority of the population, but look at it as a social practice that is both shaped by and shapes society.

Inherent in discourse are always power relations - the production of discourse is an exercise of power (Ibrahim 2005). However, there is no consensus among discourse scholars on how these power relations are shaped and formed. Van Dijk (1997), for example, claims that elite racism has more influence on racist discourse than popular racism, even though the latter may be more blatant. Political actors have more access to public discourse and can shape and form immigration policy, which can also influence discourse. As Ibrahim (2005) states, laws and policy are both an outcome and reaffirmation of discourse. Bail (2012), on the other hand, highlights the influence of fringe views on discourse, especially if the discourse becomes part of mainstream media. In his analysis, discourse that produced and highlighted fear or anger dominates mass media and focuses attention on peripheral or fringe views.

3. Mapping Racism in Iceland

In this section, we briefly highlight Iceland's historical connections with racist practices and discourses elsewhere, especially in regard to African migrants and Muslims. There are two points we want to stress in this overview. First, Iceland has historically engaged with and participated in wider discourses and practices of racism. Second, although racism directed at black people is evident historically and contemporarily in Iceland, structural racism is much more salient than hateful personal encounters for people from the African continent and Middle East in Iceland.

Most nations' official narratives over-simplify their history, origin and culture (Anderson 1991). Iceland is no exception, with Icelanders often emphasizing their shared origin and assumed homogeneity (Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir 2009). In line with the constructed national identity of Nordic origin and culture, it was believed that, up until the last decades, immigration was more or less non-existent in Iceland, which ignores the extensive mobility to and from Iceland throughout the ages (Loftsdóttir 2016, 269; Oslund 2011; Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir 2009). As Loftsdóttir (2012) has pointed out, there has been a lack of acknowledgement of Iceland's participation in colonialism, which involved various engagements that cannot be reduced to engagements between state actors (see also Loftsdóttir & Jensen 2012; Lüthi, Falk & Purtschert 2016). In Iceland, colonialist images of other people have been reproduced and reaffirmed, alongside the whitewashing of Iceland's complicity in Europe's colonial past as part of Nordic exceptionalism (Loftsdóttir 2012; Rastas 2012). In different places in the Nordic countries, this imagination of a non-colonial past has facilitated racist and denigrating symbols and racial slurs as something allowed in public discourse (Loftsdóttir & Jensen 2012).

Turning to our second point of emphasis concerning the importance of structural racism in Iceland, it is clear that Icelandic immigration policy has been strongly restrictive towards those defined as foreigners. This in itself reflects, as Loftsdóttir (2016) points out, how the category of the foreigner has intersected with race in Iceland. Race itself has not always been at the centre when it comes to the exclusion of foreigners, but has intersected with other ideas of the purity of Icelanders and the perceived homogeneity of the Icelandic nation and the absence of foreign influence (Loftsdóttir 2016, 268). Research has shown that, although discrimination against people with foreign backgrounds certainly exists in Iceland, people from African countries speak of less hostility in Iceland as compared to their experiences in other European countries (Loftsdóttir 2016). This, however, has to be contextualized within the intensity of racism elsewhere and the racialized policies of immigration that have kept African people out with a few, for example, arriving in Iceland due to labour migration (Loftsdóttir 2016).

Since the data collection for this research concluded, asylum seekers and refugees have emerged as scholarly subjects to a greater extent along with their growing numbers and visibility within Icelandic society. This research has shown that asylum seekers feel various forms of exclusion from Icelandic society, especially from participation in the labour market (Tryggvadóttir 2018; Tryggvadóttir & Skaptadóttir 2018). It has also shown the importance of better taking into account the needs of young asylum seekers and refugees (Ottósdóttir & Wolimbwa 2011), such as in the educational system (Harðardóttir & Magnúsdóttir 2018; Harðardóttir, Magnúsdóttir & Dillabough 2019). Many teachers express, for example, anxieties due to the growing number of asylum seekers and refugees, partly due to the lack of institutional support (Harðardóttir, Magnúsdóttir & Dillabough 2019, 10-11). Also, analysis has indicated that popular views of asylum seekers and refugees in Iceland often echo views in other European countries (Loftsdóttir 2018).

3.1. Policy and Governmental Discourse

Iceland's policies on refugees and asylum seekers have historically been restrictive. During the Second World War, a number of people applied for residence permits in Iceland in an attempt to escape persecution in Germany, but the vast majority were denied (Baldvinsson 2016). One important aspect of racialized migration to Iceland is the low rate of granting asylum, which is among the lowest in Europe (EUROSTAT 2018). This is partly due to European asylum policies, as well as the definition of safe countries of origin (ECRE 2015). In Iceland, the majority of applicants come from countries which are deemed to be safe (Útlendingastofnun 2018a).

Furthermore, a high number of applications are not processed in Iceland, either because they are withdrawn or because the applicant has been deported on the grounds of the Dublin Regulation (Schuster 2011). The percentage of withdrawn asylum applications increased during the time of the research, from 16% in 2016 to 43% in 2017 (Útlendingastofnun 2018b). This increase is very likely due to a new procedure that bars applicants from entering the Schengen area for at least two years if their applica-

tion is judged to be ostensibly unfounded. Furthermore, if the applicant comes from a safe country, he or she may not be given time to leave Iceland voluntarily but may be deported [2] immediately and subsequently barred from entering the Schengen area (Útlendingastofnun 2016).

When analysing governmental discourses through parliamentary speeches, laws and regulations, as well as the discourses used by law makers, ministers and governmental officials in the news, what emerges is that the discourse on asylum seekers often involves the number of people arriving. These discussions usually reflect the assumed problem that high numbers of asylum seekers are arriving in Iceland and argue for the need to control these numbers for the sake of the country. How many are too many, however, is relative. For example, in 2012, the Directorate of Immigration declared that the number of applications was so large that they had problems processing them. That year, there were 115 in total (RÚV 2013). In comparison, in 2016 and 2017, the number of applications was over 1,000 (Útlendingastofnun 2018b).

Despite the fact that the number of asylum seekers only started to rise in late 2015, the discourse among politicians and governmental officials surrounding the fear of large numbers of asylum seekers and them misusing the system dates further back and can be seen in political debates from both ends of the political spectrum. The discussion about asylum seekers misusing the asylum system is quite frequent in governmental discourse, even though unevenly spread along party lines. In this discourse, a distinction is often made between real and fake refugees, where the latter group is seen to be looking for protection but then working illegally and receiving food and shelter. Many politicians used similar phrases that made a very clear distinction between those refugees who deserved protection and those who were only abusing the asylum system. One of the first accusations of asylum seekers misusing the system can be found in the words of the then head of the Directorate of Immigration when, in 2009, he claimed that some of the asylum seekers saw their situation as a “matter of free hotel” while sending their income back home (see discussion in Eydal & Ottósdóttir 2009, 20). A similar view was held by his successor in 2013, where she compared asylum seekers to tourists who received free services (RÚV 2013), as well as by the Minister of Justice who warned against the abuse of the goodwill of the Icelandic people by asylum seekers (RÚV 2017).

The official reports from the state police concerning terrorism, border policing and organized crime (Greiningardeild ríkislögreglustjóra 2015a, 2015b, 2017a, 2017b) offers a glimpse into the governmental thinking that migration and asylum seeking is a threat. In these reports, asylum seekers are repeatedly singled out as a group of people who deserve special attention. The image of them as a threat is not only constructed by raising the possibility of them misusing the asylum system with false claims (Greiningardeild ríkislögreglustjóra 2017b, 2) but also by them draining resources from criminal investigations (Greiningardeild ríkislögreglustjóra 2015a, 12) and destabilizing society (Greiningardeild ríkislögreglustjóra 2015a, 6-7) because their arrival is seen as fuelling racist sentiments. Those who are victims of racism are thus made responsible for it. These reports draw contradictory images of asylum seekers as both victims and perpetrators

of crimes, without putting these images into context or comparison. The reports mention the possibility of “young Muslim men” being radicalised (Greiningardeild ríkislög-reglustjóra 2017a, 19), thus lumping together all young Muslim men with the implication that they as a group are easily radicalised due to their religion and age. The images of asylum seekers in these reports are constructed as a threat to Icelandic society, ironically precisely because they are in a vulnerable position.

3.2. Online and Public Discourse on Asylum Seekers

For this part of our analysis, we collected online news articles from 2009 to the beginning of 2017 that included the words refugee and asylum seekers, as was mentioned earlier. During this period, there was a large increase in the overall number of news and comments concerning refugees and asylum seekers. Before 2015 (2009-2014), the most common topic in the news regarding asylum seekers and refugees was reports about their individual cases, often consisting of interviews with the refugees or their lawyers. In 2015-2016, other topics started to dominate the discourse in the news, even though reports of individual cases continued. At that time, the most common topic in the news was the number of asylum seekers, both in Iceland and in Europe in general. The news that focused on their numbers were 40% domestic news, while 60% are on numbers of asylum seekers in Europe.

During this time, negative comments from readers became more dominant, especially after September 2015. In 2016, news about borders was the most common theme, followed by news about crimes, individual cases and numbers of asylum seekers. Both racist and anti-Muslim comments were on the rise during the time of data collection. Sometimes, these comments were disputed by other commenters, but quite often, they were ignored. The comments were usually not directed at the refugees themselves but at other Icelanders and/or policy makers and politicians, with calls being made to close the borders, send “them [asylum seekers] “back” or resign from the Schengen Agreement, all in order to halt refugees coming to Iceland. There are many examples of comments that call for a homogenous nation and criticize multiculturalism. Other comments display anti-Muslim racism, with attempts to instigate fear of Muslim “takeover” and arguing that Iceland needs to learn the lesson of the other Scandinavian countries, by not accepting refugees in the first place in order to minimize problems that the commenters associate with Muslim immigrants.

Other comments revolve around allowing refugees to settle in Iceland if they assimilate. Comments focusing on assimilation can be seen as corresponding to strong official emphasis in regard to migration in general in Iceland, including asylum seekers, that emphasises integration and assimilation (Harðardóttir & Magnúsdóttir 2018, 195). Anti-black racism is also present in the comments, usually attached to news articles where individual cases were being discussed. Racial slurs are frequently used in the comments. The use of racial slurs in Iceland is, in general, often justified on the basis of Icelandic exceptionalism, which states that such comments are not racist because racism against black people has never existed in Iceland (Loftsdóttir 2016, 2012).

One interesting aspect of this extreme part of the discussion is the intersection of race, culture and gender stereotypes. The high proportion of young males among asylum seekers is viewed as a threat and a sign of their patriarchal culture, with questions about why they did not stay behind and fight and send their wives and children out of the country instead. This is often contrasted with the us, where the commenter, often with limited knowledge of the wars or situations in the countries people are fleeing from, expresses how he would do things differently such as staying and fighting or bringing the family with him.

A common theme is also to question whether unaccompanied minors are actually minors, where the age of the youngsters fleeing is questioned. In cases where people from Africa were discussed, a strong tendency was to associate them with human trafficking and black men were often portrayed as criminals, gangsters or traffickers. This is all taken as a part of the idea that refugee men come from cultures that are patriarchal, that they are either selfish and do not care for the female members of the family, or that they have an ulterior motive, such as taking over Western civilization. This is often put forward as a way to create a cultural hierarchy between “us” and “them”. Where “they” don’t care about women and children, while “we” are more advanced when it comes to gender equality.

Such civilizing discussions regarding needing to protect Muslim women from Muslim men has a history in Iceland (Loftsdóttir 2011) and reflects wider European discussions on the safety of Muslim women, where violence against them is seen primarily as the result of their culture or ethnicity (Meetoo & Mirza 2007) Meetoo and Mirza (2007, 194) have questioned why violence against Muslim women in particular has suddenly started to receive attention. This concern has been reactivated by many populist parties in Europe, where the highly patriarchal emphasis of protection of vulnerable women revolves around white men not only having to protect white women and children, but also powerless minority women (Norocel 2016, 381).

4. Experiencing Racism

We now turn to our participants’ experiences of racism in Iceland. While their experiences of racism differed, their replies were generally characterized by the sense that they had not experienced much racism in Iceland. Quite often, they brushed off the topic or talked about the racism in Iceland as being less than elsewhere. Many of them stressed, furthermore, that Icelanders were nice and good people. Again, it would be simplistic to explain this by simply saying that racism does not exist in Iceland. Many of the participants did not want to talk much about racism, whether they had experienced it in Iceland or elsewhere. Many of them had also experienced worse racism elsewhere in Europe and thus dismissed it in Iceland. As one participant said: “We are used to that, it happens everywhere”.

The group that talked the least about racism or prejudice in Iceland were all fleeing persecution, imprisonment or possible execution in their homeland because of religious beliefs, sexuality or participating in protests. Perhaps not surprisingly, they did

not think that racism in Iceland was their most serious problem. What might play a part in their perception of racism is the difficult life experiences many of them have had. When asked about racism in Italy, where he had stayed before, a man from East Africa answered that he was more worried about going hungry and sleeping on the streets. The structural violence they experienced due to their situation is, therefore, more of a concern to them than racism as such.

Despite many of them initially not recognizing racism in Iceland, they still gave examples of it when asked further about their experience of living in Keflavík, a town in the southwest of Iceland where many of them had lived during part of their stay. Many of them mentioned that they had experienced racism there, describing incidents of buses driving past their bus stop or people speeding up to them and then driving away. In Loftsdóttir's (2016) study, people of African origin living in Iceland gave a somewhat similar account of racism, but they denied it being very significant or stated that it was less explicit than elsewhere. Yet, many of them had experienced racist encounters. In Keflavík, the asylum seekers often joined up to go on shopping trips and afterwards walked together back to their accommodation. They could also easily be identified as asylum seekers from their housing, since it was well known that they were housed there by the Icelandic government.

Some of them talked about getting strange looks on that route, which could have been because they were visibly different in this otherwise perceivably homogenous town. Many of them preferred living in Reykjavík, where it was easier for them to blend in. This can be seen as an example of how whiteness is the norm in Iceland (Loftsdóttir 2011) and where, as elsewhere, black bodies are seen as "alien, foreign and other" (Linke 2008, 113). In addition to black or dark bodies, these men could furthermore be easily identified as asylum seekers. Some of our interlocutors interpreted their visibility and otherness as instigating fear in the local population. They were not only racialized because they looked different, but precisely because of their position as asylum seekers.

This can also be seen in the words of Mohammed, who experienced different reactions from people after they heard he was a refugee.

People who are doing this, they're scared, understand. They want to help, but they're scared. They [thought I was from], I don't know, Spain, Portugal. "No" I said, "I am from Afghanistan". "Oh!" They scared at first when they heard refugee, from a dangerous country.

The Muslim participants in this study were well aware of how they are seen as a threat due to their religion, which is ironic as many of them were fleeing religious extremism. They attributed this to the fact that people did not really know them as individuals, but only knew about what was in the news about them. As one of them said: "People, they just watch news. They don't even meet Muslims in their life". In this regard, their status as asylum seekers, their precarious position in society and their racialization all intersect and create exclusion and difference.

More participants in this study talked about experiencing institutional racism than racism on a personal level. This institutional racism took several different forms in their experiences, ranging from the personal attitudes of service providers to the racism inherent in the asylum system. A few of them had experienced negative attitudes from the staff of the Directorate of Immigration, as described by Abdoulaye.

Sometimes, you feel these people, they don't like me. You know, sometimes it's what you feel, the way they take you, you know, the face they saw you, you know, immigration people, you know?

This particular participant was the most explicit about the negative attitudes he experienced at the immigration office. Adewale similarly claimed that “Iceland don't want people like me here”. What he seemed to be indicating was that the immigration system was an embodiment of Iceland as such, since earlier in the interview he claimed that he had not experienced very negative attitudes from the Icelandic people themselves. Research elsewhere has shown that encounters with individuals working within the asylum system that are supposed to enforce the law can be quite traumatic, generating a sense of being categorized as a criminal through actions such as forced deportation¹ (Bhatia 2015). For our interlocutors, the racism inherent in the system itself (then the intersecting personal communication with those embodying the system and regulations excluding them from participation in society) was much more important than individual reactions or comments that they received in the wider society.

Another reason why so many of them stress the importance of this institutional racism might be the fear that it would affect their possibility of gaining asylum. Therefore, institutional racism is more of a problem to them because they perceive that there is more at stake. Some saw the immigration system as biased or racist in and of itself.

[First author]: Have you experienced racism in Iceland or in other European countries?

[Farid]: By people, no, but by immigration, yes.

More interviewees talked in this manner. After being asked about racism, they answered by referring to the immigration system. In some cases, they seemed to view a negative decision for their asylum application as a form of discrimination. Therefore, the laws or policy was seen as racist in itself because it excluded participants on grounds of their origin.

Our quote in the beginning of the paper reflects this sense of institutionalized racism intersecting with people's experiences of being categorized as asylum seekers or refugees. Research has shown the precarious position that asylum seekers are in, where they are stuck in legal limbo, neither fully here nor there, and often are not able to work or study while waiting for an answer to their asylum claim (Hynes 2011; see also Goodman & Speer 2007; Crawley & Skleparis 2018). Refugees, however, gain support and

security when receiving their refugee status. In addition, the discussion surrounding refugees is often not as vicious as the one surrounding asylum seekers (Bhatia 2015).

Our interlocutors did not differentiate much between the categories of refugee and asylum seeker and were not very eager to use either word to describe their own identities. Some of them felt that by being an asylum seeker, their identity was reduced to being a case and that they were not perceived as persons. As one of them said: "I don't want to be an asylum case". Another one, after agreeing with his roommate that asylum seekers were looked down upon, further elaborated that he saw his identity being reduced to a case and that the need to be processed or to go to court where he would be scrutinized or doubted seemed degrading to him.

Yeah, it put you in a box, look you like a nothing, even say, oh my god this is right. I hate this name about refugee, asylum or what it is called, your case, interior or court or high court or middle court or down court or don't believe you.

From these accounts, it is clear that the participants do not emphasize difference between asylum seekers and refugees. Most of them perceive themselves as refugees but do not want that part of their identity to define them as persons. Most of them were waiting for a time when they could stop identifying themselves as refugees.

Nobody in this situation right now, nobody like to be a refugee, even by myself I don't like myself to be a refugee, how are other people to accept you?

... refugee, maybe it's just my feeling, I just don't like that one even though it's ... even though people think "but that's what you are", yeah, I just don't ... I just don't like that.

This is similar to Martha Kumssa's (2006) findings where her research participants were not seeking to be seen as refugees and wanted rather to be seen as immigrants or citizens in the new country. Many of the participants who did not experience racism felt that asylum seekers in general were looked down upon, and did not want to be seen as asylum seekers.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we have shown that both past and present immigration policies have racializing effects. Fears of racial mixing and fear of large numbers of immigrants coming to Iceland has played a part in the construction of Icelandic immigration policy. Immigration from countries outside of Europe has been minimal and, due to structural factors, continues to be so. One of the few ways for people originating outside the EEA to permanently migrate to Iceland is through the asylum system, but as we have shown, it is difficult for asylum seekers to gain legal status in Iceland. Racist discourse or nega-

tive sentiments towards asylum seekers is prevalent in both governmental and public discourse, as was indicated in our analysis. These discourses engage directly or indirectly with popular European depictions of people seeking international protection as either false or real refugees, where some deserve to be deported by force if necessary.

The participants in the study did not, however, emphasize this racism, while acknowledging it. Rather to them, popular racism and racist discourse was much less problematic than institutional racism. This is similar to what Loftsdóttir (2013, 2016) has discussed in relation to the experiences of migrants from African countries in Iceland. There were plenty of racist visuals and textual representations of black people in Iceland, but the lived experience of those racialized was not necessarily negative. In fact, there is a total absence of asylum seeker, refugee or immigrant voices in comments on news articles about these groups. In contrast, their voices are sometimes heard through news coverage about individual cases which report their personal stories of migration, as well as their deportation, in sympathetic ways. Contrary to the perception that Iceland was absent in projects of colonization and to claims of exceptionalism or absence of racism, Iceland still exhibits many forms of racist practices and racialization. Negative discussion about refugees and asylum seekers has increased in recent years, parallel to increased number of refugee claimants.

In this study, the participants tended to downplay their experiences of racism and emphasized that most people in Iceland were good people. However, as we have stressed, this perception is not because racism does not exist but because it seemed insignificant in comparison to other factors. Their difficult life experiences and racism they had experienced elsewhere might also have influenced their perception of racism in Iceland. Some of the participants also seemed to internalize the negative perception that they face as a group to some degree, for example, by wanting to leave the category of refugee and become normal. This also reflects how their precarious position and vulnerability to structural violence and institutional discrimination is of more concern to them than racism in society. Suffering from hunger or poverty, fearing death or great harm if deported to their countries of origin, having their identity reduced to a case or a parcel that is sent between countries within Europe, all was perceived as racism to them.

Our interlocutors felt the need to separate themselves from the labels of refugee and asylum seeker, indicating the negative associations that these terms have and of which they are well aware. Raman's statement in the beginning of this article can be seen as a way of internalizing prejudice against asylum seekers. While he does not see such comments as being racist, he understands his position as being excluded. "I want to be the same as other people". He added that refugees are "very low" in comparison with other migrants, meaning that they are at the bottom of the immigration "hierarchy". The desire to become equal to others is echoed in the words of many other participants. "When can I be like others?" asked Nyamkye the first time we met. Two years later, we met again. By then, he was one of the fortunate ones who had received refugee status. His appearance had changed. When we first met, he seemed very serious. "Now I feel like others" he said with a big smile on his face. "Now I feel normal".

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Note

- 1 While the term used officially is “returned”, we use “deportation” here to recognize the political nature of the usage of particular terms (Cleton & Chauvin 2020).

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