

In Search of Belonging

A case study on feelings of belonging and home from the perspectives of Syrians with a refugee background and actors involved in their integration process in Middelburg, the Netherlands



Maartje Oostveen & Mila de Wit

The drawing on the cover was drawn by Marlou Pluijmeakers in the Pennywafelhuis during our fieldwork period. The people in the drawing are visitors from the Pennywafelhuis. The photos on page 7, 9, 15 and 60 were taken by Anda van Riet in the Pennywafelhuis. All other photos were taken by the authors.



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Where I Am From¹

I am from my early memories
From lovely friendship and harsh separation
I am from the three days that I spend in the war with deserted streets
From shoes mixed with blood, with music of warplanes

From the dark black nights and sound of hungry dogs
I am from the morning when my dad asked a man who's ready to shut down his shop and leave the
country, "Do you have kuboos? Even if it is old?"
Believing that one day the sun will rise up again and light this persecuted city

I am from the beautiful neighborhood and the nice people
From my grandma's house and pomegranate trees
I am from the smell of summer rain and fresh air
Birds singing and the wind dancing with the trees

I am from Nova and Muhammad Ali,
Where both of my grandpas live in heaven
I am from the wing on the branch of a fig tree
From the grapes hanging from the pergola
I am from my early memories and full life of dreams

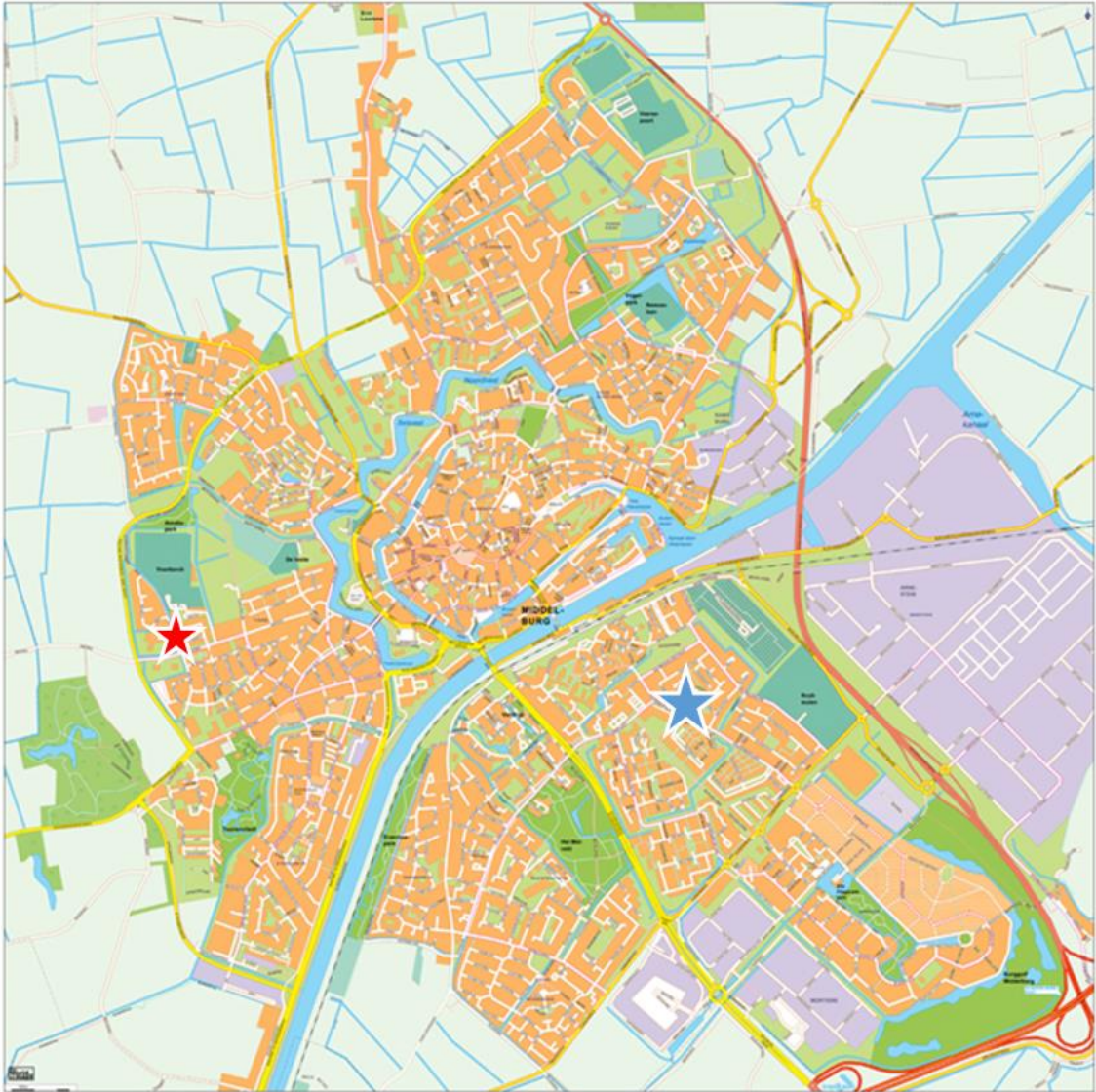
¹ "Where I Am From", Anonymous Syrian Refugee, May 27, 2019, <https://projectworthmore.org/where-i-am-from-a-poem-by-a-syrian-refugee/>

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Map of Middelburg

Figure 1: Map of Middelburg²



- ★ • Neighborhood 'Dauwendaele'
- ★ • Asylum reception center (AZC) of Middelburg

² "Stadsplattengrond Middelburg," Kaarten en Atlassen, accessed June 23, 2021, https://www.kaartenenatlassen.nl/sites/default/files/Stadsplattegrond_Middelburg_Lowres.jpg

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Introduction



Introduction

“What is home without all the things? You can build the home again, but you cannot bring back all the people who you loved.”³

Nisrin

Nisrin is a 36 year old Syrian woman who came to Middelburg, the Netherlands in March 2015. Eight months earlier, while she was still pregnant with her third child, her husband fled Syria seeking a safer place to live with their family. While Nisrin is still processing the sudden disruption with what was once her home, in her new environment people constantly remind her that she is different from her fellow-citizens. She soon learns that a safe home is not enough to feel at home in a place, and that in fact a sense of belonging is needed in order to feel this again. This research aims to create an understanding of what it means to belong and to be home for Nisrin and other Syrian status holders living in Middelburg, and how they try to reshape these feelings in their place of resettlement. At the same time, we will look at the ways in which stakeholders concerned with integration perceive the meaning of belonging and home, and how their integration policies contribute to the development of these feelings. In doing so, we will be connecting stories told by both Syrians and involved actors from organizations, institutions and projects to theories that have been prevailing in debates concerned with ‘belonging’ and ‘home’ over the last decades, such as Antonsich’s place-belongingness (2010), and Yuval-Davis’ (2006) politics of belonging. In order to understand these phenomena through the eyes of our participants, we have applied several qualitative research methods which have led us to answer the following research question:

“How are a sense of belonging and feeling of home mediated through integration processes and reshaped by Syrians with a refugee background in Middelburg, the Netherlands?”

Never before have so many people been forcefully displaced by wars, conflicts or other disasters⁴. Displacement pulls a person out of a life characterized by commonality and stability, and puts it in a life characterized by uncertainty and being out of control (Ramsay 2020, 388). The search for a feeling of home in the country of resettlement is therefore characterized by many obstacles. In order to feel home again, a sense of belonging is considered as crucial (Buonfino and Thomson 2007, 6). Belonging

³ Nisrin, six years in the Netherlands, semi-structured interview, 09-03-2021

⁴ “Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2019”, UNHCR, accessed January 27, 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2019/>.

means to be part of something and connects people to one another, which creates a sense of being valued and recognized (6). The absence of recognition and not being valued explains why people can still not feel part of a group, even when official membership is granted (Antonsich 2010, 650). Moreover, belonging is multidimensional and can be experienced through a variety of personal relationships, institutions, groups, and other spheres (Buonfino and Thomson 2007; Croucher 2004). This means that one's non-belonging to a certain group does not necessarily mean that one cannot experience a sense of belonging at all. A sense of belonging and feeling at home are thus not bounded to a specific place, time or people (Taylor 2015). In reshaping a sense of belonging and feeling of home among people who have fled their country, policy makers and organizations concerned with the reception and integration of refugees play a very important role from the moment people arrive to their country of resettlement, and will therefore also be examined in this research. The meaning attached to integration by both status holders and policy makers is inherently connected to a sense of belonging and feeling of home (Ager and Strang 2010; Hynie 2018).

For this research the perspectives from both Syrian status holders as well as from organizations, institutions and projects that are concerned with integration and the wellbeing of status holders were studied. Combining these two perspectives brought us to a complementary research which contributes to the extension of knowledge about a sense of belonging and feeling of home in the context of Middelburg. Besides, all municipalities in the Netherlands are currently creating a new integration policy for status holders⁵. Our research offers an interesting and relevant point of view for the designers of this policy in Middelburg and our research is therefore not only scientifically relevant, but also relevant on a societal level. Lastly, our fieldwork took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and since very little research on processes of homemaking and belonging has been conducted in such a context, our research can offer different insights as well.

In the field

Methods

For this research, we have conducted fieldwork over a period of twelve weeks in the city of Middelburg, the Netherlands. To find an answer to our research question and create a tacit understanding of the way that a sense of belonging and feeling of home are reshaped by Syrians with a refugee background and mediated through integration processes, we applied the methods of participant observation, hanging out, having conversations, and both informal and semi-structured

⁵ "Gemeenten in startblokken voor nieuw integratiebeleid," VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, October 9, 2018, [Gemeenten in startblokken voor nieuw integratiebeleid | Zuidwest-Nederland | | VluchtelingenWerk Nederland](#)

interviews with our participants. Since this is a complementary research, both of us worked with a different research population and therefore all interviews were conducted individually. While Mila de Wit focused on Syrian status holders, Maartje Oostveen's research population consisted of people who either work or volunteer for organizations, institutions and projects concerned with integration processes in Middelburg.

Through interviews with our participants, our primary research method, we aimed to get more in-depth information about our research topics. We conducted both semi-structured and informal interviews, which we recorded, and transcribed afterwards. While most interviews were one on one, several interviews were also conducted with two or three people at the same time, which created interesting discussions and different insights. Furthermore, almost all interviews were held in real life, either at the participants' homes, at the office of the organization in question, or outside. However, Maartje did participate in some online events and held several interviews online due to the COVID-19 restrictions.

Since many regular activities did not take place any more due to the pandemic, we decided to do volunteer work as a way to do participant observation and become involved in the lives of Syrian status holders and understand what kind of role social organizations play in their integration. Since in many places both research populations came together, we conducted most of this volunteering work together. First of all, we both started working as an integration buddy, which entails helping a status holder to become familiar with Dutch society. Mila was coupled up with two Syrian women, Rawan and Saousan, who she visited once a week. Since they were also willing to participate in our research, the appointments simultaneously became moments in which the methods of hanging out, participant observation and having conversations were carried out. Maartje on the other hand managed to join several interventions of the "integration-buddy project", in which several students and buddies evaluated the project. All the information gathered through these methods was captured in fieldnotes.

Another place where we started working was CitySeeds, a city garden in the neighborhood of Dauwendaele⁶ where, among others, residents from the local asylum seekers' center (AZC) as well as status holders come to work in the garden. Although we did not specifically meet Syrian status holders through this project, the project itself has been relevant in understanding how projects contribute to a sense of belonging for status holders in general. We also started teaching Dutch and computer lessons at the Pennywafelhuis, a community art project also located in Dauwendaele. Here we got to

⁶ Dauwendaele is a neighborhood in Middelburg where many status holders live due to the great amount of social housing.

meet many Syrian people. Besides having classes with these people, we also spent a lot of time here while conducting the methods of hanging out, participant observation, and having conversations with both the founders and other visitors. Lastly, we also worked for COA⁷ (*Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers*) in the AZC, where we taught Dutch classes, did one-on-one walks with residents, and learned about the AZC through the perspective of both COA and residents. In addition, we regularly played games with residents or hung out around the center and consequently got to meet several Syrian status holders living here. Our frequent presence in all of these places not only allowed us to perform a lot of participant observation, but also allowed us to build rapport with our participants, which consequently increased the quality of our interviews.

Ethical concerns

We have consciously chosen to do volunteer work during our fieldwork in order to find and be among participants, but also because we were determined to do something in return for our research populations. Nevertheless, we are aware of the ethical concerns that come with doing research as a volunteer. To be clear, all organizations knew that we were doing research. However, not all people (eg. volunteers, visitors, residents of the AZC) we met in those places and occasionally spoke to knew this, due to a language barrier or because the situation did not require it. Sometimes we completely took on the role of volunteers and did not actively collect data, especially when the people we were working with at that moment had no idea we were researchers (like in the AZC). Nevertheless, these moments (unconsciously or not) contributed to the context and bigger picture we eventually tried to capture from these places and were therefore also relevant to our research in one way or another. Taking this into consideration, the line between researcher and volunteer was sometimes blurry. However, we did not directly involve any of these people in our research without permission.

Nevertheless, the fact that we worked as volunteers could have had an impact on our position as researchers in the field. For Maartje, being a volunteer for the organizations and projects that were part of her research population as well contributed to their willingness to share information. They seemed to be more open and willing to participate in the research as Maartje was also participating in their projects. Furthermore, for Mila being a woman, it was often easier to make contact with female participants than with male participants, because among the latter group there was often confusion about the intentions to approach them. However, after they came to understand what the intention was, a good research relationship was nevertheless established.

Another ethical issue that we had to cope with was the COVID-19 pandemic and its

⁷ The institution COA in relation to our research will be further explained in chapter two, the context.

restrictions. During our fieldwork there was quite a strict lockdown, which implied that among many other measures, facemasks in public spaces were obligatory, as well as keeping 1,5 meter distance and only receiving one visitor a day. As we did volunteering work in several places where lots of people came together, as well as had many participants that we saw in real life, we were in frequent contact with people. Although we tried our best to maintain distance and wear facemasks where necessary, it remained hard sometimes to strictly follow the measures. This was not helped by the fact that most of our participants and/or people that we worked with did not care much for said measures. We were very much aware of the risk and therefore communicated regularly with our participants about what they expected from us in terms of the measures. In addition, we kept a close eye on whether we had any symptoms ourselves.

Outline

In the following chapters, we will delve deeper into both the theoretical and practical components that constitute our research. In chapter one we will start with the theorization of integration, followed by discussing a sense of belonging, which is divided into politics of belonging and place-belongingness. We will continue with how a feeling at home is reshaped, specifically focusing on the role of memories, social interaction and physical environment. After discussing these theories, we will describe the context in which our research has been conducted in chapter two. Following, we will outline our findings in the empirical chapters three and four. As practices and ideas concerning integration in relation to home and belonging create a better comprehensive understanding of the context in which Syrian status holders live in Middelburg, we start with discussing the perceptions on integration, home and belonging from organizations, institutions and projects concerned with integration in chapter three. In chapter four perceptions and stories of Syrian status holders themselves are discussed. Eventually, we will bring both perceptions together, and draw a conclusion in chapter five, ending with a final discussion about our research and findings and suggestions on further research.

Chapter 1: Integration, belonging and home in theory



1. Integration, belonging and home in theory

That people move across and within nations is not a new phenomenon. However, never before so many people have had to migrate forcibly from their homes. Due to conflict, natural disasters, persecution and famine (Braithwaite, Salehyan and Savon 2018, 5) a record of people, up to 79.5 million worldwide, were forcibly displaced by the end of 2019⁸. Once arrived in a safe, but often unknown country, the displaced persons have to start a whole new process of resettlement and reshaping of a new home. Hereby they have to integrate into an often unfamiliar culture and society. Since this research is concerned with a primarily anthropological perspective on home and belonging through the perspective of people with a refugee background, and the perspectives of organizations and policies concerned with this target population, we will following examine the theoretical context of these specific theme's. Hereby we will first continue with defining what integration means for people with a refugee background as this is something that both the people with a refugee background and the external factors have to deal with in practice and can therefore not be left unseen when considering the creation of a sense of belonging and home. Thereafter, the concepts of belonging and home will be examined, ending with analyzing how these two concepts relate to one another in theory.

1.1. Integration

Maartje

Integration is something that both the people with a refugee background themselves and the local municipality and institutions deal with from the first moment of gaining status. According to Robinson (1998, 118) and Castles et al. (2001, 12), integration is such a broad and multidimensional concept that bringing it back to one definition would never fully cover what it actually entails (Ager and Strang 2008, 167). Nevertheless, Ager and Strang argue that as integration is something that is in practice affecting so many people, creating a working definition is of high relevance. One cannot seek 'successful' integration without conceptualizing what integration in itself means (2008, 167). Therefore a model was created that encompasses four levels of integration. Firstly, employment, housing, education and health are all considered as 'markers and means' as they are indicators of successful integration. Secondly, the 'social connection' entails the different forms of social relationship that status holders are able to have and create during the integration. Thirdly, language and cultural knowledge, and safety and stability create the 'facilitators' and lastly the rights and

⁸ "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2019", UNHCR, accessed January 27, 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2019/>

citizenship of the status holders are considered as the foundation of integration (Ager and Strang 2008, 169-70).

Since this research is furthermore concerned with the sense of belonging and home, the actual relationship between these concepts and integration is of great importance. In later work, Strang and Ager emphasize, in addition to their model, the importance of recognizing the way that belonging plays a role in integration and how integration is always a two-way process. They state that “assumptions about what it means to belong to a nation shape understandings of integration” (2010, 594). Furthermore, it is emphasized that the nature of the different levels are intertwined and depend upon the specific social context (2010, 590). Hynie (2018) divides this social context into three facets: the social connections between refugees and the other member of the community; the way that the refugees are welcomed (or not) by the community members; and the way that organizations and institutions adapt to the refugees’ needs. As the research is done with organizations and institutions and their perspectives on integration, especially the last facet is of relevance. In addition, Phillimore (2012) combines this importance of belonging, the social networks, and the possibilities for the status holders concerning legal rights and resources as defined as markers and means by Ager and Strang (2008)(Kearns and Witley 2015, 2106). All in all, this comprehensive understanding of integration by Phillimore (2012), is best applicable in addition to the more practical model as constructed by Ager and Strang (2008).

Being able to create a sense of belonging is crucial in being able to integrate, but what does it actually mean to belong? In order to fully understand the way that belonging impacts the integration, we will therefore continue with defining a sense of belonging.

1.2. Belonging

Mila

‘Where do I belong?’ is a question that enters the mind of every individual sometimes, but for a displaced person it can be a constant state of wondering. Being forcefully pulled out of a life and being pushed into a new one without ever wanting it in the first place, reinforces the feeling of being lost between countries (Krzyzanowski and Wodak 2008, 95). Someone can experience not belonging anywhere, neither to the country of origin, nor to the host country. Even when granted legal status, this feeling of ‘in-betweenness’ will not just dissolve into a sense of belonging to the host country (Ramsay 2020, 395).

Belonging and Politics of Belonging

The meaning of belonging is often considered as common knowledge and therefore poorly defined in literature (Antonsich 2010, 644). Even more often, scholars apply the concept synonymously with notions of identity (Dragojlovic 2008; Warriner 2007) or citizenship (Clark 2009; Getrich 2008; White and Gilmartin 2008). Scholars like Yuval-Davis and Antonsich have therefore asked for a critical reconsideration of the concept. They argue in the first place that belonging should be considered as something dynamic (Yuval-Davis 2006, 199), since it is an ongoing process of becoming or constructing something, rather than a fixed state of being or a feeling that people naturally have (Antonsich, 652). Moreover, belonging consists of different layers that should be analyzed both separated as well as interconnected (Krzyzanowski and Wodak 2008, 99), which is also how we will be approaching a sense of belonging in our research. In the most comprehensive sense, belonging means to be part of something and is mostly defined by the culture(s) one forms part of, one's identity, and the rights ascribed to one's identities (Buonfino 2007, 6).

Yuval-Davis (2006) makes a clear distinction between 'belonging' and the 'politics of belonging'. Belonging is about emotional attachment, feeling 'at home', and feeling safe. When one of these elements disappears, for instance through forced migration, one's belonging is threatened. Once threatened, one becomes very conscious of her/his belongingness. Yuval-Davis divides belonging into three levels; (1) social locations, (2) identifications and emotional attachments, and (3) ethical and political values. Firstly, with social locations, she refers to social categories we belong to within society such as ethnicity. Secondly, with identifications and emotional attachment, she refers to belonging as the construction of one's identity based on desires to be part of a group. However, when these identity constructions are forced on people, they become intertwined with someone's social location (Yuval-Davis 2006, 197-202). This means that people are ascribed an identity, which for instance can hinder them from belonging to groups they actually wish to belong to. As described by Van Liempt and Staring (2021), this is often the case for people with a refugee background, as they cannot get rid of their ascribed refugee label and therefore experience trouble in belonging within their new environment (14). However, Van Liempt and Staring (2021) also state that these labels are highly politicized (4), which brings us to Yuval-Davis' third level of analysis; ethical and political values. In short, it implies that people's social location and identification are also influenced by the way in which political ideologies about identities and ascribed roles define who belongs and who does not. This is a phenomenon described by Yuval-Davis as politics of belonging, and will be further discussed in the following paragraph (2006, 203).

Politics of belonging is a concept concerned with categorical boundaries determined by higher

powers that decide who belongs and who does not. The most significant example of this is the nation state. Driven by higher powers, these politics determine who is entitled to citizenship and what roles are ascribed to members. In doing so, they juxtapose groups of people who may not differ that much from each other in reality, but yet they are treated as such and consequently also behave as such (Yuval-Davis 2006, 203-5). In the case of belonging to the nation state, legal factors such as resident permits are indeed essential in feeling safe and offer the opportunity to participate within the nation, both generating feelings of belonging (Antonsich 2010, 648). On the other side, denial of membership excludes people from identifying with the group they wish to belong to (Jones and Krzyżanowski 2011, 650). Besides the nation state, many other actors are playing a role in shaping someone's experience of belonging, such as municipalities. The ways in which these offer space and opportunities to belong (eg. integration programs, community centres) are for instance highly influential in creating a sense of belonging among people with a refugee background (Van Liempt and Staring 2021, 2).

Continuing with the meaning of belonging, Antonsich (2010) states that Yuval-Davis (2006) sticks too much to belonging as equal to collective identity and citizenship. Although he does not deny the importance of politics of belonging as Yuval-Davis describes it, he highlights the importance of the emotional feeling of being at home in a place that contributes to a sense of belonging, in which home "stands for a symbolic space of security, comfort and emotional attachment" (Hooks 2009, 213). After all, even when political belonging is granted, people might still not experience a sense of feeling at home, which Antonsich refers to as 'place-belongingness'. In order to belong, one needs to feel free to express her/his identity, be recognized as part of the community, and be valued and listened to, meaning that political approval is not sufficient if the rest of the society fails to 'grant' this recognition (647-50). Where Yuval-Davis (2006, 209) would state that things such as adapting cultural behavior from the dominant group could function as tools in finding this sense of belonging, Antonsich continues that even when one does this, there would always remain other dimensions such as skin color preventing "full sameness". He thus claims that political belonging (e.g. citizenship), nor cultural belonging (e.g. adapting cultural behavior), can ever fully serve for what it takes to really belong, precisely because of our social location (e.g. ethnicity), as referred to by Yuval-Davis (2006). Although Yuval-Davis' meaning of belonging contributes to the understanding of the concept in our research, we are even more interested in what her definition fails to explain, and therefore continue with focusing on the emotional feeling of being at home in a place that contributes to a sense of belonging, or rather called; place-belongingness (Antonsich 2010).

Place-belongingness: Feeling 'at Home'

Antonsich's 'place-belongingness' constitutes out of five factors: the auto-biographical, relational, cultural, economic, and legal (2010, 647). Firstly, the auto-biographical relates to one's experiences, relations and memories from the past attached to a place, with those created during childhood often remaining the standard throughout one's life. Secondly, the relational factors reflect the social ties one has in a place (647). Third, cultural factors (eg. cultural practices, language) play a role in creating a sense of community and one's intimacy with others, besides having political functions as described by Yuval-Davis (2006). Fourth, economic factors provide people with safety, stability and future perspective in a given place. Last, legal factors such as citizenship are essential in creating security, which again is a vital dimension of belonging (648).

As shown, belonging is indeed a multidimensional concept that is rather a process of becoming than a state of being. Many aspects contribute to experiencing a sense of belonging, each of which is constantly subjected to change (Antonsich 2010). Although feelings of being at home facilitate a sense of belonging to a high extent, they cannot be studied without considering the interconnectedness with the politics of belonging. This is also the case for people with a refugee background, as Van Liempt and Staring (2021) explain. Although factors such as social relations or economic stability can act as sources for belonging in their new environment, their sense of belonging is also depending on their social location and the ways these locations are judged by higher powers (14). For people with a refugee background, the search for new attachments and a sense of belonging in order to feel at home and being acknowledged as a member both officially and socially in their new environment, is therefore a troubled struggle for recognition that never stops (Krzyzanowski and Wodak 2008, 114-5).

1.3. Home

Maartje & Mila

As discussed in the previous section, a sense of belonging cannot be understood without taking into consideration a feeling of home, especially when examining the experiences of displaced people (Boccagni 2017; Taylor 2015). Therefore we will continue by creating a better understanding of the concept of home in relation to the experiences of the displaced.

In the early static structural-functional paradigm of anthropology the meaning of home did not get much attention as a unit of investigation (Brettell and Hollifield 2014, 1). However, together

with the shift towards a focus on transnationalism⁹, the relationship between the movement of people and the emotional value attached to home became an important subject of research (Rapport 2014, 206-8; Roberts 2019, 88). This change in perspective on the meaning of home has led to a broad range of conceptualizations by various authors (Samanani and Lenhard 2020). In the following paragraphs we will discuss a variety of concepts and perspectives on home that are relevant for our research.

Taylor (2015) describes home as “an intersection of space, time and social relations” (3). Even more detailed, Roberts (2019) gives a multidimensional understanding of home which “involves places, spaces, emotions, activities, and a state of mind or being”. The ‘space’ that encompasses the feeling of home is not static and bounded, but should be considered as rather mobile and fluid, which is especially the case concerning the home of the displaced (88). In order to come to terms with home as being fluid, Samanani and Lenhard (2020) recognize that home can be an imaginative space, which is “often grounded in memories and the past and are often [...] taken into the present and the future” (13). Boccagni's approach (2017) covers the previously mentioned conceptualizations with what he calls the process of “homemaking”. He defines this process as *homing*, which encompasses the “temporal and spatial practices through which migrants attempt to reproduce, reconstruct and possibly rebuild meaningful home-like settings, feelings and relationships.” In doing so, the past, present and future homes are intertwined and memories of past homes become an integral part of current homemaking practices (26).

Taylor (2015), Boccagni (2017) and Duyvendak (2011) each make a distinction between the spatial home and the social home. Duyvendak argues that there are two situations needed for feeling at home; ‘haven’ and ‘heaven’. ‘Haven’ concerns a comfortable, safe and predictable place, like for example one’s house. ‘Heaven’ is the social situation in which one feels comfortable. When these two situations come together one can eventually ‘feel at home’ (21). This distinction between the physical place and the social situation is a very applicable point of departure for further specifications of *homing*. However, following the distinction between ‘haven’ and ‘heaven’, the dimension of temporality is not directly taken into consideration, while we aim that memories from the past home play an essential role in reshaping a feeling at home, as argued below. In line with this, Taylor refers to this as the temporal home, a concept she uses to explore “the refugee's understanding of home as it relates to the past, present and future” (2015, 5).

The temporality of home could be characterized as “a processual experience that takes time, is (re)produced over time and requires its own allocations of time” (Boccagni, Murcia and Belloni

⁹ Transnationalism emerged in the late 1980s and is based on the outmoded idea of borders due to globalization, whereby the sociocultural and identity processes are placed within the experience of movement (Horevitz 2009; Rapport 2014, 6; Tedeschi, Vorobeva and Jauhiainen 2020).

2020, 12; Pink 2010). Home as an experience and memory is thus ever changing, and could therefore be considered as temporal. Boccagni (2017) mentions for example that displaced people often search for something that might replace or simulate the 'old home' rather than identifying the "present living circumstances as home-like" (17). Moreover, Taylor (2015) emphasizes that the past home is not only associated with good memories, but that these memories can be painful as well (2-4).

One of the most common thoughts when thinking of home is the idea of home as a geographically locatable place (Boccagni, Murcia and Belloni 2020, 10-11). However, a feeling at home is not always related to a fixed place and should rather be understood taking the notion of time and memory into account, in which the identification with a specific place may still be in the 'past' for people with a refugee background (Van Liempt and Staring 2021; Rapport and Williksen 2012, 3). At the same time, physical places and material possessions in people's present surroundings may also contribute to the memory of the past home (Miller 2001). They make the displaced able to deal with past dispossessions and experiences, and continue everyday life in the new surroundings (Van Liempt and Staring 2021, 3; Ryan-Saha 2015; Taylor 2015). Material possessions can thus make the physical 'house' into a 'home' and therefore play an important role in homemaking (Samanani & Lenhard 2019, 5). In addition, Van Liempt and Staring (2021) also highlight the importance of physical places that are not directly related to one's house or material possessions. The presence of public and private spaces like a mosque for instance, can "represent the traditions, norms, and values practices in the country of origin and can offer a safe and familiar environment in which newcomers can explore an unfamiliar host society" (3; Duyvendak 2011). As municipalities are primarily responsible for the presence of such places, they play an essential role in the processes of homemaking for newcomers. Moreover, open and green spaces are also important as they can serve as "places of restoration" (8), which can be described as "places with aesthetic qualities of beauty, where one can relax, empty one's head, and forget about one's worries" (314). Becoming attached to such places and becoming familiar contributes to homemaking processes in the host culture (Van Liempt and Staring 2021, 15), while discovering such places also adds to a sense of autonomy within a new place, also an essential feature in feeling home (Boccagni 2017). Besides, places also provide opportunities for social inclusion and interaction (Buonfino 2007, 18), which is also very important, as described below.

Everyday social interactions, social networks and encounters with people or intimate moments with others also highly contribute to the experience of feeling at home, which is referred to as the social or relational home (Taylor 2015, 215). According to Taylor, the relational home consists of three elements; people, social practices and resources. People are the ones with whom we interact, like friends or neighbors. Social practices are what people collectively engage in to make their

environment familiar. Last, social networks provide people with resources and opportunities for reciprocal exchange, such as economic support, which creates a sense of security (215-18). Emotional attachment, familiarity, and security, are also described as crucial elements in feeling at home by Antonsich (2010). Among the five factors that contribute to place-belongingness as discussed in the previous paragraph, the relational and the auto-biographical factors specifically contribute to the social home (Antonsich 2010, 647). Though all forms of relationships matter, the ones that significantly generate a sense of belonging and feeling at home, are those that are long-lasting, stable, and that take place through frequent physical interaction, according to Antonsich (2010). However, relations are two-sided and therefore the relational factors, and the resulting feelings of home, not only depend on one's own effort to invest in social interaction, but also on the presence of an inclusive and welcoming social environment (2010, 647-8).

However, as described previously, not only the presence of relationships in that place at that time, but also the memories of having ancestors in that particular place, contribute to the feeling of being at home (Antonsich 2010, 647). The meaning of the social home is thus partially shaped by the nostalgic representation of social relationships from the past. However, holding on too much to these nostalgic feelings can hinder one from feeling at home in the country of resettlement, as these social relationships can never be reshaped in the same way. Learning how to accept this, while finding new ways to reshape their social home, is what people with a refugee background often have troubles with (Taylor 2015, 261-1).

According to Van Liempt and Staring (2021), forming new social relations with locals is often found to be very hard, and trigger memories of past social lives even more (11). Yet these new social ties are essential in shaping a new identity after fleeing, Valenta states (215-6). Moreover, they provide one with economic opportunities, social activities, or advice for instance. Together they are crucial in contributing to the feeling of home (Taylor 2015, 20). As presented, home is a multidimensional concept, in which homemaking is always a continuous process. The relationship between the past, present and future are important to recognize in obtaining a deeper understanding of the *homing* of displaced people, while at the same time taking the spatial and social dimensions into consideration (Boccagni 2017; Boccagni, Murcia and Belloni 2020; Roberts 2019; Taylor 2015).

1.4. Home and sense of belonging

Maartje & Mila

After having discussed both notions of home and sense of belonging, it stands out clearly that the two concepts are inherently connected and cannot be studied separately in researching how people who

fled their country reshape these feelings in the country of resettlement. Although their exact relationship remains vaguely defined, we think it is still crucial to understand in order to operationalize the concepts in practice. Scholars that are specifically concerned with the concept of home, leave a sense of belonging rather undefined and use it alongside or in addition to home without further examination of the specific relationship between the two (Boccagni, Murcia and Belloni 2020; Taylor 2015). Van Liempt and Staring (2021) do touch upon the relation between the two, and primarily argue that belonging adds to homemaking (15). At the same time, both Yuval-Davis (2006) and Antonsich (2010) approach home as a feeling that can contribute to the improvement of a sense of belonging. For the course of this research we will apply the two concepts as defined by Buonfino and Thomson (2007), who state that a lack of belonging explains why people do not feel at home in a new place (6). In other words, by focusing on how people try to reshape a sense of belonging, we can explain why and how people feel at home.

Chapter 2: Context



2. Context

2.1. Syrians with a refugee background and home

Mila

Ever since the start of the civil war in Syria in 2011, over 12 million Syrians have fled their homes. Among them, 5.6 million managed to flee the country¹⁰. The war is a result of what once started as a peaceful revolt by civilians against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. In an attempt to swiftly end the revolt, the government responded with brute force, which eventually led to the official start of the civil war on March 15, 2011¹¹. The war continues to this day, and has claimed more than 400,000 lives already. While a large majority have sought refuge in neighboring countries, about 1 million asylum applications have been made in Europe since 2011. The number of Syrian refugees coming to Europe peaked between 2013 and 2016, leading to the so-called refugee crisis. In the Netherlands, the number of Syrians increased by 63,000 since 2011. Today, about 106,000 Syrians reside in the Netherlands¹².

Some of those reaching the Netherlands came directly from war zones in Syria, while others resided in other countries around Syria for a certain period of time before reaching the Netherlands, ranging from a few months up to years. Once having arrived in the Netherlands and having applied for asylum, refugees have to go through a two staged admission and reception procedure, which includes spending two days in an investigation center and several months in an asylum centers (Korac 2003, 55). When asylum seekers receive a provisional permit to stay, their reception procedure is followed up by a third stage which can take up to three years. During this stage, refugees are assigned to a municipality by the COA (Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers), which is responsible for their housing procedure¹³. During the refugee crisis, many municipalities however had lots of troubles finding houses, meaning that many refugees had to spend much longer than intended in the asylum centers (Van Heelsum 2017, 2142). Although they were officially allowed to start their integration process, the complexity and the unawareness about its requirements in the

¹⁰ "Syria emergency," The UN Refugee Agency, accessed December 12, 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>

¹¹ "Syrië: miljoenen mensen op drift," Landen van Herkomst, Feiten Cijfers, VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, accessed December 12, 2020, <https://www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/feiten-cijfers/landen-van-herkomst/syrie-miljoenen-mensen-op-drift?gclid=CjwKCAiAlNf-BRB EiwA2osbxWCYqBPYbYfAzN1C jLDJ454 I74Jv O4-7iH7jMVBPrq3M68Ln9rhoCbyAQAvD BwE>

¹² "Bevolking; geslacht, leeftijd, generatie and migratieachtergrond, 1 januari," CBS StatLine, last modified June 10, 2020, <https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/#/CBS/nl/dataset/37325/table?fromstatweb>

¹³ "Huisvesting van Statushouders," COA, accessed January 25, 2021, <https://www.coa.nl/nl/huisvesting-van-statushouders>

Netherlands made this almost impossible. Together, these procedures were therefore often perceived as very humiliating, and as a waste of time (2142).

As this research has as well has been conducted with organizations, institutions and projects that are concerned with the integration and wellbeing of these Syrian status holders, we will continue by describing the specific context of these involved actors in Middelburg.

2.2. Mapping the field: Involved organizations, institutions and projects in Middelburg

Maartje

As stated in chapter one, integration and the creation of a sense of belonging and home are interwoven. Thus, to create an understanding of how organizations, institutions and projects influence the creation of home for the Syrian status holders, this research has been conducted among several actors that are directly or indirectly concerned with the integration processes and wellbeing of status holders. These actors all influence different facets of the integration process and the experiences in Middelburg for status holders, taking into consideration the conceptual framework of integration of Ager & Strang (2008). Following, these organizations, institutions and projects will be briefly outlined following (broadly speaking) the order in which the status holders get to deal with them, although this happens often simultaneously, and the different actors collaborate.

COA

The institution COA (Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers) is responsible for the reception of asylum seekers. COA is an “independent administrative body” which means that they are independent, but do perform governmental duties, whereby the Ministry of Justice and Security is the client and supervisor¹⁴. They provide a safe place to live (in the so-called AZC’s), the necessary means, support and guidance in their preparation for their future in either the Netherlands or their country of origin¹⁵. For the status holders this means that the very first part of the integration process starts in the AZC, which is called the ‘pre-integration’. In this ‘pre-integration’ program the inhabitants of the AZC with a high probability of receiving status or who have received status already can follow Dutch language classes and as well as ‘knowledge of Dutch society’ trainings¹⁶.

¹⁴ “Organisatie,” COA, accessed May 16, 2021, <https://www.coa.nl/nl/organisatie>

¹⁵ “COA,” COA, accessed May 16, 2021, <https://www.coa.nl/nl>

¹⁶ “Programma voorbereiding op inburgering,” COA, accessed May 14, 2021, <https://www.coa.nl/nl/programma-voorbereiding-op-inburgering>

VluchtelingenWerk Walcheren

In the first year after being assigned to a house or apartment, the NGO VluchtelingenWerk (Council for Refugees) is active in providing support and guidance with integrating in Middelburg. The new status holders are guided by a volunteer from VluchtelingenWerk, and the goal is to make sure that the status holders are able to stand on their own two feet within the one year that the volunteers of VluchtelingenWerk provide social support¹⁷. For some, this is of course not feasible, for example when one is analphabetic. Moreover, juridical assistance will remain provided by VluchtelingenWerk, even after the end of their more active support in the first year.

Municipality of Middelburg

At the moment the municipalities of the Netherlands are responsible for the housing of the status holders, but not directly for the course of the integration process, since this is still the responsibility of the status holders themselves. This will change in January 2022 as presumably a new integration law will be applied. This law entails that the municipality will become responsible for arranging the integration, whereby everyone gets their personal plan of integration¹⁸. However, the municipality of Middelburg is already working towards this new law and is dealing with integration in a way that goes beyond the expectations from the national integration law as they facilitate projects that anticipate on the improvement of the integration of status holders. Several organizations are assigned to execute this local integration policy, which will be further explained below.

Orionis

Employment is perceived as one of the markers and means of integration following the conceptual framework of Strang and Ager (2008). Since almost all (new) status holders do not have a paid job yet in the first period of their stay in Middelburg, they receive social assistance benefit¹⁹ from the state in order to make ends meet, and thus have to cope with the ‘Participation law’²⁰. This ensures that they are guided by the organization that is responsible for the guidance to the labor market of people who do not have a job, which is Orionis²¹, commissioned by the municipality of Middelburg.

¹⁷ Ronneke van den Wildenberg, semi-structured interview, 12/03/2021

¹⁸ “Nieuwe Wet Inburgering,” Rijksoverheid, accessed May 15, 2021, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/inburgeren-in-nederland/nieuwe-wet-inburgering>

¹⁹ “Wat u van ons kunt verwachten,” Orionis Walcheren, accessed May 15, 2021, <https://www.orioniswalcheren.nl/op-weg-naar-werk/wat-u-van-ons-kunt-verwachten.html>

²⁰ Everybody who can work but who is not able to enter the labor market without support falls under the participation law (Participatiewet). This law makes that more people can, and have to, find a job. “Participatiewet,” accessed May 14, 2021, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/participatiewet>

²¹ “Orionis Walcheren,” Orionis Walcheren, accessed June 7, 2021, <https://www.orioniswalcheren.nl/>

WelzijnMiddelburg

WelzijnMiddelburg is the organization, commissioned by the municipality, that among others facilitates and executes the projects and programs that are concerned with the social support of status holders in Middelburg during their integration process²². The project '*Integratiemaatje*'²³, is set up in order to connect status holders who need some more social support or interaction is linked to a Dutch inhabitant of the Middelburg. Furthermore the project '*Aan de Slag*' that is arranged and executed by Pharos, the municipality of Middelburg, COA and WelzijnMiddelburg. This project is concerned with making the asylum seekers and status holders that live in the AZC participate in Middelburg. Hereby they are linked to voluntary work for a social organization or neighborhood initiative²⁴.

Pennywafelhuis

The Pennywafelhuis²⁵ is a community art project in the neighborhood Dauwendaele. It is located in an apartment in one of the big flats in the neighborhood where people with all kinds of ethnic and social backgrounds live. Everybody is always welcome to have a cup of coffee or tea in the house, or to join some of their activities or workshops.

CitySeeds

CitySeeds is a community garden located between the flats in the neighborhood Dauwendaele, they provide vegetables for people with a low income. The garden is maintained by mainly volunteers, among which many inhabitants of the AZC as part of the project Aan de Slag²⁶, and several status holders.

The perceptions and practices concerning integration, belonging and home of the involved participants from these organizations, institutions and projects will be examined in chapter three: *To integrate is to belong*.

²² "Integratieprojecten," WelzijnMiddelburg, accessed May 15, 2021, <https://www.welzijnmiddelburg.nl/de-buurt/voor-iedereen/integratieprojecten>

²³ "Integratieprojecten," WelzijnMiddelburg, accessed June 6, 2021, <https://www.welzijnmiddelburg.nl/de-buurt/voor-iedereen/integratieprojecten>

²⁴ "Welzijn Middelburg zoekt vrijwilligers voor project Aan de Slag," WelzijnMiddelburg, accessed June 6, 2021, <https://www.welzijnmiddelburg.nl/vacatures/welzijn-middelburg-zoekt-vrijwilligers-voor-het-project-aan-de-slag>

²⁵ "Pennywafelhuis," Pennywafelhuis, accessed June 7, 2021, <https://pennywafelhuis.nl/>

²⁶ See footnote 24

2.3. Home and belonging in times of COVID-19

Maartje & Mila

Since we strive to create an as comprehensive as possible understanding of home and belonging, in which the component of time is an important factor, we cannot leave the effects of COVID-19 unseen as part of the context in which our research was conducted. Now that many social activities and interactions that usually contribute to homemaking do not take place anymore, and people are more than ever on their own, spending most of their time between the physical walls of one's house, creating an actual feeling of home might take on a completely different meaning and process. The COVID-19 measures have in particular a big impact on the more 'vulnerable' people of the Dutch society. According to Kraaij-Dirkzwager, Tromp and van der Torn (2020), asylum seekers and status holders are considered as more of a 'vulnerable' group on the basis that the COVID-19 measures have a relatively big impact on their lives. Due to the COVID-19 measures, asylum seekers and status holders have less of a future perspective, experience more inactivity and they may lose control over their lives. Consequently this leads to being somber and less participation in society (2), which on its turn will also have an (negative) impact on their sense of belonging and feeling of home (Ramsay 2020, 388).

Chapter 3: To integrate is to belong



3. To integrate is to belong

Maartje

In the following chapters we will discuss our findings from the research conducted in Middelburg. Starting with chapter three: *“To integrate is to belong”*. In which the perspectives of the involved organizations, institutions and projects (as explained in the context) on integration in relation to belonging and home will be examined. This will be done by first discussing the perceptions on integration, followed by the way that integration is put into practice in Middelburg and how this interrelates with the challenges to the creation of a sense of belonging and home. Thereafter the perspectives of the Syrian status holders themselves will be highlighted in chapter four: *“Reshaping a sense of belonging and feeling of home in Middelburg”*. This will be operationalized according to the sub-chapters; 4.1. “Us” versus “Them”, 4.2. “What’s home without the people?”, 4.3. ‘Memories and past relationships’, 4.4. ‘Places for belonging’, 4.5. ‘Dutch: the key to integration’, 4.6. ‘Working: independence, acknowledgement and status’.

3.1. Defining integration

“And I find integration very difficult. I just imagine it for myself, that we are in that situation. It is almost impossible to imagine.”²⁷²⁸

As the co-founder of the Pennywafelhuis, Marlou Pluijmeakers is in frequent personal contact with the many visitors that are dealing with integration. Together with Anda van Riet they are therefore personally concerned with the integration processes of others. Due to the many practices that newcomers cope with during this integration, it is often perceived as highly complex in practice, as stated above by Marlou. Yet, facing its difficulties does not directly indicate that it is exactly clear what integration actually means. Since every single status holder must deal with it, and integration processes are intertwined with the creation of a sense of belonging following Phillimore’s (2012) conceptualization of integration, it is crucial to understand what integration entails in the specific context of Middelburg. Therefore this chapter is first of all concerned with the thoughts on integration as perceived by the involved participants from organizations, institutions and projects. In addition, the integration practices in Middelburg will be put into dialogue with the possible creation of home

²⁷ Marlou Pluijmeakers, Pennywafelhuis, semi-structured interview, 6/04/2021

²⁸ As all interviews with the research population for this chapter were held in Dutch, all quotes in this chapter are directly translated from Dutch to English.

and sense of belonging according to belonging as stated in the work of Antonsich (2010) and Buonfino and Thomson (2007).

Integration is not only complex in practice, but also hard to come to definite terms with. According to the thoughts of Anthonie van den Buuse on the conceptualization of integration, integration in itself has no absolute definition. He is responsible for the constitution of the integration policy of the municipality of Middelburg and is therefore concerned with integration on a policy level. His understanding is in line with the way that Robinson (1998, 188) and Castles et al. (2001, 12) perceive integration, namely as a too broad concept to bring down to one simple definition. Furthermore, Anthonie mentions that it is important to make a distinction between integration in general and the *inburgering*, as in Dutch there are two terms for integration. First of all, *integratie* is often understood as the comprehensive term for all processes that deal with becoming part of Dutch society. A part of this *integratie* is *inburgering*, which could be roughly translated as ‘becoming a Dutch citizen’. This entails the process of passing the *inburgerings*-exam and thus becoming legally speaking a Dutch citizen. The newcomer has three years after obtaining status to obtain an adequate level of the Dutch language and knowledge of Dutch society²⁹. Following the thoughts of Anthonie, integration entails way more than just the *inburgering*, considering the way that people are able to become part of the Dutch society (in Middelburg). Since *integratie* has a more extensive meaning, which is also acknowledged by the participants, I will refer to *integratie* in general when talking about integration.

Notwithstanding the fact that defining integration, in a way that goes beyond just the *inburgering*, in an absolute manner is very challenging, Anthonie defines integration, within the context of the integration policy of Middelburg, as followed:

“I would suggest, integration is the interweaving of western and non-western, [...] in such a way that a mutual understanding is established. And that could lead to connections and encounters, in such a way that the ones who come, of course mainly from foreign countries, have the feeling of ‘hey I am able to come along, to participate, I belong here, I feel at home, I am accepted, and I can build a life’.”³⁰

This broad understanding of integration embraces, among other aspects, the importance of home and belonging, and thus reflects how ideologies concerning the integration course in Middelburg are intertwined with the creation of a sense of belonging as pointed out in the definition of Phillimore

²⁹ Inburgeren in Nederland, Rijksoverheid. Accessed on April 22, 2021, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/inburgeren-in-nederland/vraag-en-antwoord/moet-ik-als-nieuwkomer-inburgeren>

³⁰ Anthonie van den Buuse, policymaker municipality, semi-structured interview, 08/04/2021

(2012). However, ultimately what happens in practice has the biggest impact on the integration and the creation of a sense of belonging for status holders in Middelburg. Therefore we will continue by examining the way that these ideas about integration are put into practice and how this may contribute to a sense of belonging and home.

3.2. Integration in practice and the creation of a sense of belonging

Creating a sense of belonging is perceived as an essential aspect of integration in both the literature (Phillimore 2012; Ager and Strang 2008, 2010; Hynie 2018) and integration in the context of Middelburg's policy as explained above by Anthonie. Practices of integration and the creation of a sense of belonging are thus highly interconnected. This means that to examine how a sense of belonging can (or cannot) be created in Middelburg for status holders, practices and guidance in integration, but also its corresponding difficulties should be considered. This will be operationalized in the following paragraph according to five factors of belonging as stated in the work of Antonsich (2010) and Buonfino and Thomson (2007, 18): the legal, economic, cultural, relational and the physical as these are to a large extent overlapping with the actual integration practices in Middelburg. Since participation could be seen as an overarching theme in the integration practices of Middelburg, it cannot be left unconsidered when studying both integration and belonging. We will therefore first outline what participation entails in relation to both belonging and integration.

Participation

When entering the AZC of Middelburg one of the first things that catches the eye is the big mural that says in colourful graffiti letters *#Meedoen*³¹, surrounded by all ways that the AZC encourages one to 'participate'. On the other side of the hall, right in front of this grand mural, the *participatiebalie* (participation-counter) can be found. Here the inhabitants of the AZC can sign up every week for all kinds of activities, both inside and outside of the AZC, with the aim of letting them be active and leave their rooms as much as possible. Jaap Bos works for COA as a supervisor and is often found behind this desk, which is as well part of the project *Aan de Slag*³². Participating is thus central to making the stay in both the AZC itself and Middelburg more comfortable. But not only is participation a central theme in COA, also all other actors involved in the integration process and policy of the status holders acknowledge that participating is one of the most important ways for people to integrate and to become part of the society of Middelburg.

³¹ #participate

³² See context.

What is meant with participating comes mostly down to 'being active in society' by means of doing voluntary work, being active in the neighborhood, joining associations, and most of all leaving one's own house and be among others. Juan Khalaf is a job-coach²⁹ for Orionis and guides among others, many Syrian status holders. He has a refugee background himself too and originates from Syria. Juan emphasizes the importance of participation in society as both part of the obligations of the Participation law³³, but also as beneficial to many aspects of integration as followed:

"Active participation in society is initially something that simply has to be done due to the Participation Law, which is thus a must that you have to comply with. But it is also important because by participating they just build a network, are busy, not sitting at home all the time, it helps so that you can stand on your own two feet. That is important. And because you are so active, and when you start working, or even volunteering, you can build a kind of network and that it is important to be able to integrate."³⁴

Furthermore Anda van Riet, co-founder of the Pennywafelhuis and photographer, notes that participation does not always entail being active in society, but also just being around in other places stimulates the integration:

"Especially the foreign people. Because they do get language lessons here, but these are actually far too limited. By actually being here, and for example, volunteering, or sewing lessons, or indeed computer lessons, or just having fun like Fatima. Just by being there, and hearing the language, they just integrate"³⁵

In the work of both Phillimore (2012) and Ager and Strang (2008), there is no specific focus on participation as part of their conceptualizations of integration. However, Hynie (2018) does incorporate participation in her broad concept of integration and states that "although the focus is often on how refugees change to integrate, successful integration requires a social context that supports inclusion and participation" (265). According to the perceptions of many of the participants, participation is something that actually facilitates and supports all other aspects of the integration process. Therefore, participation should be seen as an overarching aspect of the three themes mentioned by Phillimore (2012). Reflecting on the way that integration contributes to the creation of a sense of belonging, participating actively in society improves all aspects of the creation of home and sense of belonging outside one's own house, of which the main factors will be discussed following.

³³ Everybody who can work but who is not able to enter the labor market without support falls under the participation law (Participationwet). This law makes that more people can, and have to, find a job. "Participatiewet," accessed May 14.

³⁴ Juan Khalaf, Orionis, semi-structured interview, 22/04/2021

³⁵ Anda van Riet, Pennywafelhuis, semi-structured interview, 06/04/2021

Legal factors and bureaucracy in the Netherlands

Rights and citizenship are at the foundation of integration according to the model of Ager and Strang (2008, 170), and legal factors are a fundamental dimension of belonging (Antonsich 2010, 648; Buonfino and Thomson 2007, 20). Nevertheless, having status, and therefore obtaining the rights and citizenship of a Dutch person (for at least 5 years), does not directly lead to being integrated into the legal aspects of the Dutch bureaucratic society.

In Middelburg, VluchtelingenWerk Walcheren plays an important role in guiding the status holders through the legal aspects, rules and expectations that come with being a Dutch citizen in the first year after having gained status and being assigned to a house or apartment. Even though the status holders receive this help, it is still pointed out by the team leader of VluchtelingenWerk Walcheren, Ronneke van den Wildenberg, that actually understanding and being able to follow all the legislative rules and obligations is regarded as highly complex for newcomers:

“There is always something with the allowances, or then the benefits have suddenly been stopped, or they have to make a reapplication that they don't understand, [...]. Well they spend a lot of time on that, and then they also have to figure out how it works with the recycling system in the Netherlands, and not to forget the insurance³⁵ and so that yes, they just lose quite a lot of time with it.”³⁶

Also Anda and Marlou note that the bureaucratic system that we have in the Netherlands makes it extremely difficult for the status holders to become part of the legal system:

“ Marlou: You have to imagine you receive a letter from the IND³⁷, and they can't tie a knot to it. Well, neither do we, those are such complicated letters. But that's so damn complicated to keep you standing here.

Anda: And of course it is a very bureaucratic country, the Netherlands.”³⁷

The legal factors and access to rights and citizenship might thus be logically the starting point for belonging and integration (Ager and Strang 2008; Antonsich 2010; Buonfino and Thomson 2007), but in the end, this may happen to be the most complex part of integration in the Netherlands according to the participants of the involved organizations, institutions and projects. Therefore even the security of having legal safety, still comes with many complex rules and issues bounded to the

³⁶ Ronneke van den Wildenberg, VluchtelingenWerk, semi-structured interview, 12/03/2021

³⁷ Anda van Riet and Marlou Pluijmeakers, Pennywafelhuis, semi-structured interview, 06/04/2021

legality of living in the Netherlands and is thus this security is often not contributing to a sense of belonging in Middelburg.

Integrating in the labor market

As mentioned above, the Netherlands is very demanding when it comes to legal rules. Part of these legal rules go hand in hand with economic issues and finding a job, which brings us to the following domain of belonging: the economic factors.

Getting to understanding Dutch society inside out is difficult and takes a lot of time. Juan from Orionis notes that by working, and thus participating in the labor market, this process of integration is accelerated. This is in line with the way that Antonsich describes how being “successfully integrated into a given economy seems nevertheless a necessary factor in the process of generating a sense of place-belongingness.” (2010, 648). Nevertheless it is noted by Juan, Paulien van Toor (Team leader at Orionis), and Ronneke that it is very difficult to fully integrate into the Dutch economy and to find a job that suits the education level one had back in the country of origin, as this is often way higher than one can ever reach again in the Netherlands. Starting with a ‘lower’ job is recognized as tough for the status holders as stated by Paulien:

“But that is difficult, because someone from her/his home country, for example, has had a very high position and has been a doctor, and then here in the Netherlands is told to start behind that cleaning cart. That is also a switch.”³⁸

According to Strang and Ager (2008, 170) so called ‘non-recognition of qualifications’ leads to under-employment of the status holders. In Middelburg, not speaking Dutch and the mismatched expectations for certain jobs, indeed lead to ‘under employment’. Nevertheless ‘non-recognition’ is not exactly the case considering the assumptions of Orionis, as their aim is to personally figure out what someone’s qualifications are. It is rather the big language and cultural barrier that make it hard, if not impossible, to find a job that fits one’s qualifications right away. This takes time, and a lot of effort from the status holders themselves as well. One cannot expect to start working their ‘dream job’ right away, and has to accept these ‘lower’ jobs first in order to reach jobs that come closer to one’s qualification. This was also stated in the previous quote of Paulien and is reiterated in the following quote of Juan:

³⁸ Paulien van Toor, Orionis, semi-structured interview, 22/04/2021

“Yes and we also try to translate that to the people, that whatever you do in terms of work, that it can take a while before you can reach your dream job, but you really have to earn some money first. And as soon as people also earn some money, it is also easier to achieve that dream job. You really see as soon as they start working, also lower, then it really goes easier, that first step is very important.”³⁹

Thus, finding a job is perceived as an important part of integration, if not one of the final goals. Hereby also participation in society is seen as helpful in order to create a network that eventually may be useful in finding a job. When the status holders obtain a job they can have economic stability and be independent from social welfare, which contributes to a sense of belonging as well (Antonsich 2010, 648). Furthermore, working contributes to a sense of belonging as being active and surrounded by (Dutch) colleagues helps with learning the language and getting to understand the cultural rules of society, which will be examined in the following paragraph. Nevertheless, in practice, it often occurs that the status holders are not able to find a job that fits one’s qualifications, which is eventually not perceived as helpful in feeling comfortable or to belonging in society.

Cultural barriers and the unwritten rules of society

“Language is so to say an instrument, a key for opening the door to the new world.”⁴⁰

Learning the language is perceived as a key to integrating for the status holders as stated by Daryoush Shirzadi. As a ‘youth worker’²⁴ for WelzijnMiddelburg he is in frequent personal contact with younger status holders that visit the youth centers. According to Hynie (2018) language is part of the more functional aspect of integration, and seen as a ‘facilitator’ to integration by Phillimore (2012, 537) and Ager and Strang (2008, 182). Besides being of importance in integration practices, language is also important as part of the creation of a sense of belonging. To be more specific, language is perceived as the most important aspect of the ‘cultural factors’ that impact a sense of belonging following Antonsich (2010, 647). Following the thoughts of the participants, no command of the Dutch language is perceived as one of the biggest struggles to connect with the status holders and for them to integrate.

Nevertheless, culture is more than language, and thus the integration process goes beyond just learning Dutch. Norms and values are especially perceived as important cultural aspects that

³⁹ Juan Khalaf, Orionis, semi-structured interview, 22/04/2021

⁴⁰Daryoush Shirzadi, WelzijnMiddelburg informal interview, 15/03/2021

need to be understood in order to integrate and to belong in a place. The goal of Middelburg's integration policy is to get a better idea of each other's cultural ideas, norms and values rather than that the newcomers should only adjust to the Dutch norms and values. Marjan Ouwerkerk works for WelzijnMiddelburg as a *buurtcoach*⁴³ in the neighborhood of Dauwendaele and therefore is regularly in contact with several status holders that live in Dauwendaele. She notes that cultural differences between the women who have a different cultural background, and she or other involved actors, can lead to misunderstandings. This is illustrated in the following quote about the organisation of sport and swimming classes for women, before the COVID-19 pandemic, whereby also many status holders are usually involved:

“But also because the target group does not have the norms and values as we know them. [...]. You had to register in advance, which is already a barrier for many. But the second time I also had twenty applications and then I sit there waiting and then well, I think less than ten came. That I thought no... And I called: 'hello?, yes, yes I am sick' 'then you have to cancel!'”⁴¹

The recognition of the cultural aspects such as values and symbols in someone's surrounding is of great importance to the creation of a sense of belonging (Buonfino and Thomson 2007, 17-18). If a mutual understanding and empathy can be created in one's surrounding, the newcomers could also more easily “exercise their culture and values”. This enables them to feel like they belong also among other people than from their own cultural community (2007, 17). Creating a mutual understanding is furthermore perceived as one of the most important aspects of integration in Middelburg and frames the base for the project *integratiemaatje*. This makes that integration is not something that only status holders have to cope with, but also the ‘local’ inhabitants of Middelburg are ideally expected to adjust, or at least create empathy for the others. Hynie (2018) also acknowledges that empathy is a very important element to feeling at ease in a new environment (269). The following thoughts of Anthonie display how this idea of the creation of a mutual understanding and empathy would ideologically arise naturally in society:

“[...] and that is only possible if you learn to empathize from one culture to the other, but also the other way round. Yes, I'm aware that assuming this is already difficult, that a kind of communication or openness can be established in which people can accept each other and can say: well we can also do things together.”⁴²

⁴¹ Marjan Ouwerkerk, WelzijnMiddelburg, walking interview, 01/04/2021

⁴² Anthonie van den Buuse, policy maker municipality, semi-structured interview, 08/04/2021

Nevertheless, creating a mutual understanding and not relapsing in one's own cultural community is in the same time one of the biggest obstacles to integration as perceived by the participants. As people tend to find safety within their own cultural community, it is in practice very difficult to bypass this segregation and to create intertwinement, as stated by Anthonie:

“If they don't know that, to build bridges, that the Dutch, then people will stick to their own safety. That safety is of course one's own, yes, manners, one's own traditions, own values and norms.”⁴²

This makes that the line between fully adjusting, and thus assimilation, and not adjusting enough to the Dutch cultural factors is blurry, and therefore creates difficulties in the expectations about the degree of cultural adaptation.

All in all, understanding Dutch contributes to a high extent in making social contacts and to understand the complex rules, laws and obligations that are part of living in the Netherlands. Therefore, language as a cultural factor is a key component in the integration process and eventually of the creation of a sense of belonging. Furthermore, norms and values are perceived as cultural factors that must be understood to be able to integrate and to create a mutual understanding between the cultures, which is eventually contributing to belonging as reflected in the definition of integration of Anthonie.

Establishing local social relationships

“Through contact with a Dutch person one can see that this is how it works here, all those unwritten rules cannot all be learned from a book.”⁴³

Marijke Strating works for WelzijnMiddelburg and is responsible for the project '*integratiemaatje*' whereby she connects status holders to volunteers who are willing to help newcomers with their integration processes. The above quote illustrates well that establishing social contacts is essential in getting to understand the 'unwritten rules' of society, and thus the cultural aspects of integration and belonging as mentioned in the previous paragraph. Following Hynie (2018, 267), one of the three aspects of the social context that has an impact on integration is the way that organizations and institutions adapt to the needs of the new status holders. The organization WelzijnMiddelburg is assigned to the establishment of these relationships between the newcomers and the people that are

⁴³ Marijke Strating, WelzijnMiddelburg, semi-structured interview, 01/03/2021

living in Middelburg for over a longer period of time. They aim to 'build bridges' between the newcomers and the Dutch inhabitants of Middelburg, which is perceived as a crucial part to integration in the municipality of Middelburg. Hereby the focus is mainly on a very local integration whereby people especially establish relationships within their own neighborhood. The importance of local interactions is also recognized by both Van Liempt and Miellet (2020) and Strang and Ager (2010) as the location where "much to the 'work' of the integration process has to take place" (601), which eventually contributes to a sense of belonging as well.

What comes forward when talking to the people that are in more direct contact with the status holders, is that trust and recognition is very important to both reach the status holders in the first place and to build sustainable relationships. This is acknowledged, among others, by Marjan. She mentions that building trust relationships and recognition are important for the new status holders to make them feel comfortable to participate more in society, which eventually leads to a better overall integration. This recognition is illustrated in the following experience of Marjan:

"That's where it all starts, recognition. And I also see it from the vital women, the sports group, then you suddenly see a smile on their faces, 'oh hello Marjan!' Or at the market, very often, when I get there on Thursday, I see a lot of them here. 'Oh Marjan also just goes to the market'."44

Thus, social relationships should be local, long-lasting and frequent (Antonsich 2010, 647). Anda and Marlou from the Pennywafelhuis and Marijke from WelzijnMiddelburg add to this that the nature of the relationship has to be equal in order to be able to create a sense of belonging among the relationships you have. Only by having equal relationships, the newcomers can actually feel at home in a place, as reflected in the following quote:

"Just equal, that's not a method, you have to have it in you. Equality and from person to person, that is one thing here. That the regular visitors here have the feeling that they come home here."45

Altogether, creating a social network is seen as highly important to integration, which is reflected in the work of WelzijnMiddelburg and other initiatives. The emphasis concerning the establishment of these relationships is on a very small scale and local basis in the integration practices of Middelburg. Both participation and an understanding of the cultural factors are important in order to reach stable and frequent relationships with others. However, without the establishment of

⁴⁴ Marjan Ouwerkerk, WelzijnMiddelburg, walking interview, 01/04/2021

⁴⁵ Marlou Pluijmeakers, Pennywafelhuis, semi-structured interview, 6/04/2021

relationships with Dutch people, it is hard to create an understanding of each other's culture as well. This makes that the cultural and relational factors of belonging are both very important yet highly intertwined in practices of the integration course.

Places to feel at home in Middelburg

The house; besides a place where people should feel at home, it is most of all the location that is perceived as troublesome to reach people and make them involve in society. As stated in the previous paragraphs, participating actively in society is recognized as important to integrate and create a sense of belonging. This makes that when the status holders spend a lot of time inside of their houses this is seen as unbeneficial for their integration process and eventually to feel at home in places, or among people in Middelburg. The following and last paragraph of this chapter is therefore concerned with the way that specific places in Middelburg may offer an environment where one can feel at home outside the house, as this is perceived as highly important to both integration and belonging (Buonfino and Thomson 2007; Van Liempt and Miellet 2020; Ager and Strang 2008; Hynie 2018, Phillimore 2012). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, several of these meeting places have remained closed and could therefore not serve as safe places. Nevertheless, some remained open, whereby the Pennywafelhuis is one of them:

It is a warm and sunny Tuesday morning, it is 10 o'clock when Mila and I arrive at the Pennywafelhuis. When entering the Pennywafelhuis at the front, we have to pass a small second hand shop. The store is about the size of one garage box, and the Pennywafelhuis is located on the ground floor of the Meanderflat, which consists out of three big blocks of grey flats in the neighborhood 'Dauwendaele'. The towers of the different flat-entrances are painted in red and yellow in an attempt to make the building look less somber. In the small shop we are kindly greeted by Ria, a slim lady with an age of about 65. She wears, just as we do, a face mask. She asked whether she can help us, but realizes just the second after that we are 'the girls' that come here every week. "Sorry, people are so unrecognizable with these facemasks sometimes". We cross the hall of the flat, where a table with bread and dairy products is placed for people with a small income, to take with them for free. The Pennywafelhuis itself an oasis of colours, artworks, knitting pieces, and pictures. In the biggest room the walls are full with portraits of visitors of the house, painted by Marlou. When we enter the big room, we meet Anda, who is walking around busy with her photo camera, wearing big, round sun glasses. She greets us cheerfully and points us to the pictures we must take a look at. She printed the photo's she took the past few weeks. All of the (regular) visitors can find pictures of themselves while doing their things; drinking coffee, painting,

following computer classes, knitting, or just having a chat with the fellow visitors. Syrian, Dutch, and Eritrean men, but mostly women, arrive one by one to the Pennywafelhuis and chat with each other. People can take home the pictures that they like, but Anda repeats about every five minutes that we must share, and that people should only take the pictures with themselves on it.

The ladies for the computer lesson are too late today. Lama, one of the Syrian ladies that follows our 'computer classes', brought "real Syrian falafel, not the chickpea-balls you buy in the supermarket in the Netherlands". We are all invited to eat, and sit outside in the small garden on the other side of the building, eating the most delicious falafel together. Computer class can wait today, we should first enjoy the food and the sun.⁴⁶

This vignette of a day at the Pennywafelhuis gives an impression of how a place could feel like home. Due to the homely atmosphere, where nothing is necessary but everything is possible, a place like this is where safety comes together with the possibility to establish comfortable and equal social relationships. Following Duyvendak (2011, 21), this is thus a place where 'haven' and 'heaven' come together and feelings of home could be established. Being here is not specifically about being active or participating, as mentioned in the quote below of Anda:

"I don't think it has much to do with activities, but it's just about having a place that they can relax here for a while."⁴⁷

This emphasizes that participation as something that contributes to integration and belonging does not only mean being active in doing activities. It can also entail just being around others on a frequent basis and thus to establish more long-lasting social relationships.

Furthermore, the garden of CitySeeds is a place where people can come to volunteer and participate both physically and socially. Also located between the grey flats of Dauwendaele, the green garden fields full of vegetables, fruit trees and buzzing bees, creates a true fertile green space in spring and summer. The garden is maintained by volunteers from the AZC and other inhabitants of Middelburg. Jaap Flohil is one of the supervisors of the garden. Following his thoughts on home in combination with gardening, it is possible that a place like CitySeeds contributes to feelings of home as you are very much connected to this place and actually see things grow that you might have planted, which makes one feel more connected to a physical place:

⁴⁶ The information has been captured in fieldnotes on March 30, 2021.

⁴⁷ Anda van Riet, Pennywafelhuis, semi-structured interview, 06/04/2021

“Yes because as it is the case for me [feeling at home in the garden], I can imagine that it is also a bit for others, that you can transfer that. And certainly if you're there for a long time, because you sow something and it comes up and then you eat it. I can imagine that it is very nice for people that they go through that process and that you experience it together, I think.”⁴⁸

Besides being a place where people come and work together, a garden like this also highly contributes to the physical aspects of the neighborhood. It could therefore as well contribute to a safe and pleasant feeling which is beneficial for the creation of a sense of home and belonging for the many people living in those flats (Buonfino and Thomson 2007, 18; Van Liempt and Miellet 2020).

In conclusion, in Middelburg several places are present that were still accessible during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participating in these physical places contributes to feeling at home in the city outside one's own house, and thus adds to the creation of a sense belonging according to the factors of both Antonsich (2010) and Buonfino and Thomson (2007): the legal, economic, cultural, relational and physical. Certainly, due to the pandemic many other places that facilitate this participation and the creation of a sense of belonging have been (partly) closed down, which eventually must have been highly disadvantageous for both integration processes and feeling at ease in the city.

All in all, practices and ideas concerning integration through the perspective of the participants from organizations, institutions and projects as examined in this chapter may contribute to the creation of a sense of belonging for status holders. However, the same factors that should add to a sense of belonging mediated by integration also can constitute barriers in both the integration, and processes concerning the creation of a feeling of home and belonging in Middelburg. Participation is hereby perceived as the key to overcome these difficulties. To reach a more holistic and tacit understanding of what home and belonging mean for status holders in Middelburg, we will continue with looking at these themes through the perspectives of Syrian status holders in the following chapter: *Reshaping a sense of belonging and feeling of home in Middelburg*.

⁴⁸ Jaap Flohil, CitySeeds, informal interview, 16/03/2021

Chapter 4: Reshaping a sense of belonging and feeling of home in Middelburg



4. Reshaping a sense of belonging and feeling of home in Middelburg

Mila

“If I feel part of this place? Not now. I’m not part of this city. Because after a long time I’m still feeling I’m a refugee. Because I live in the AZC. I didn’t get to go out and meet Dutch people. Maybe it will change when I have a house. I will learn Dutch faster and get to know more Dutch people. I will try to find a job. And if I get a good job and a good future for me and my life, of course I will become part of the Dutch society. But for now that is not possible. I don’t know how life goes here with people, how to work, how they are thinking. I tried, but it’s difficult because we have distance from each other.”⁴⁹

Mohammed

The asylum reception center (AZC) of Middelburg is located on the outskirts of the city, where houses gradually make place for countryside. Mohammed and about 40 other status holders are currently residing here while they are waiting to be assigned a house. For those who already moved into their new house, this center formed the ultimate station in their search of finding a new place to live. After fleeing Syria, undertaking a dangerous journey, and spending months or years in different reception centers spread across the Netherlands, Middelburg eventually became the place where they could start a new life. Ever since my participants received a resident permit and knew this was going to be the place where they had to rebuild their future, they have been faced with many struggles in reshaping a sense of belonging and a feeling of home. In this chapter we will analyze how Syrian status holders living in Middelburg reshape these feelings, starting off with the experiences of those who still live in the AZC. In doing so, we will discuss Yuval-Davis’ (2006) levels of analysis of belonging, continue with Antonsich’s (2010) five factors of place-belongingness and complement this using Boccagni’s (2017) conceptualization of homemaking.

4.1. “Us” versus “Them”

When the AZC moved to its current location, surrounding neighbors demanded a free space between their backyard and the area surrounding the AZC. Although it is only a few meters wide, it reflects both the physical and social barrier that exists between residents and citizens of Middelburg. Residents describe the place as a small village within the city; besides living here, they can do volunteer work, join activities, and even see a doctor. As a result of the corona measures, the center

⁴⁹ Mohammed, two years in the Netherlands, semi-structured interview, 31-03-2021

has become even more isolated. Besides the already existing physical barrier with the outside world, the absence of activities to join outside the center and the restrictions for outsiders to visit residents, have also increased the social barrier with the outside world. Although projects for participation are offered, as described in the previous chapter, people indicated not experiencing a sense of belonging because of a lack of opportunities to participate in the city, to meet new people, and consequently be able to practice Dutch and become familiar with the Dutch culture.

Not being able to participate is partially hindered by bureaucratic procedures and regulations. As long as status holders are not assigned a house, it is hard to start their integration course. Only after passing the integration exam, they can start looking for a job or go to school. Living in a neighborhood, having a job and going to school are indirectly ways to meet new people, practice Dutch and learn about the Dutch culture. This shows that Antonsich's relational and cultural factors that contribute to place-belongingness (2010, 647-8), are nevertheless impacted by the ways in which bureaucratic procedures determined on higher political levels define the extent to which people can participate in society based on their status, as explained by Yuval-Davis (2006).

Moreover, housing procedures have also been delayed due to the pandemic, meaning that people like Mohammed and Abduljalil have been waiting much longer or were assigned a house elsewhere than initially promised. Their lives, which have been characterized by instability and uncertainty ever since the outbreak of the war, therefore remain unpredictable. According to Antonsich (2010), stability and security are essential components of one's belonging to a place (648), and could therefore partially explain the absence of a sense of belonging among my participants. The unpredictability of people's life in the AZC together with past traumas sometimes even lead to physical and mental problems. While joining activities inside and outside the AZC are normally ways to forget about these things, the absence of them as a result of the pandemic has left people with even more worries, as well as more time to worry.

According to my participants living in the AZC, another big obstacle in reshaping a sense of belonging is that they still feel treated like a refugee and therefore different than their fellow citizens. However, following the stories of my participants who have been living in Middelburg for quite some time, the feeling of being different does not disappear after being assigned a house. This is illustrated by the following quote:

Ashraf: "My friend, someone asked him if he eats with a fork and the spoon or he ate only with the hands. If he knew how to use them."⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Ashraf, four years in the Netherlands, semi-structured interview, 15-03-2021

Sazuki: "I was going to say that; No sorry, we only have camels and we live in a tent."⁵¹

Nisrin often experiences similar situations, even with people she has known for years. After she got divorced, her Dutch friends asked her whether she would finally remove her headscarf now:

"I said, what's the relation? They think that the man is the controller and obliges you to wear them. [...] I chose that, not him. So why I remove it? They will understand that I'll be more free. It's the ideas they have about Arabic culture."⁵²

Both quotes show that Syrians are treated differently based on labels and certain associated behavior ascribed by Dutch people. Moments like these do not only make Syrians feel different from the Dutch, but also make them feel subordinate (Van Liempt and Staring 2021, 321), and consequently even more distanced. Following Yuval-Davis' levels of analysis of belonging (2006), the stories of my participants show that (part of) their social identity is rather ascribed by others in their environment instead of chosen themselves, and as such has become an important dimension of their social location within the Dutch society (203). Moreover, their social identity is mainly defined by their religious and ethnic background, while other dimensions of their identity (eg. age, education, class) are left unconsidered. Thus, although Yuval-Davis (2006) analyzes social locations and social identifications as two different levels that define one's belonging, my participants do not experience this in daily life. Instead, where they belong or to what group they belong is defined by others, and in doing so they are framed as inherently different, opposing to what "the Dutch" typically stand for. Consequently, it rather confirms their non-belonginess, which makes the distance between my participants and the people they wish to belong to very difficult to bridge.

The way other people identify my participants also has an impact on the way they identify themselves. None of them identifies her/himself as Dutch or expected to ever feel that way, even after obtaining a Dutch passport:

"To others I'm still the same person. I'm not gonna walk around showing my passport to people. [...] They will still see me as that 'Syrian guy'. I'll be like that forever."⁵³

Salah

⁵¹ Sazuki, five years in the Netherlands, semi-structured interview, 15-03-2021

⁵² Nisrin, six years in the Netherlands, semi-structured interview, 21-03-2021

⁵³ Salah, six years in the Netherlands, semi-structured interview, 24-03-2021

Even after passing the last official stage in becoming a “full citizen” of the Dutch society, one is still not considered as such because of labels ascribed by others, and consequently does not feel that way. As described in the theoretical framework following Antonsich (2010), it thus shows that even when one is willing to adapt cultural behavior in order to belong to the dominant group, one’s social position as determined by the dominant group will still prevent her/him from “full sameness”. Nevertheless, this does not stop people from trying to reshape a sense of belonging. In the following section we will continue with discussing how relational factors play a role in the process of reshaping a sense of belonging (Antonsich 2010).

4.2. “What’s home without the people?”

It’s a sunny afternoon. Mahmud⁵⁴ is sitting on his bed. From the window he can see the football field, where a number of men are playing fanatically. The table in front of him is filled with all kinds of stuff. A pot of instant coffee, a telephone, a newspaper, two cups and some biscuits. Next to the table are standing two gray closets. The walls are empty. Nothing indicates that this room belongs to Mahmud and his roommate. Next to his bed there are two suitcases and some bags standing. Tomorrow Mahmud will be signing the contract of his house, he explains. “Coffee?”, he asks. He gets up from his bed and walks towards the other side of the room. He is limping. “What happened to your leg?” After pouring water in the kettle, he pulls up his trouser leg. His knee is all swollen. His face is twisted with pain. With a few words of English he manages to explain that he got injured while walking from Syria to the Netherlands. When the water is boiling, he walks back to the table, grabs a cup, pours some instant coffee into it, and adds water. Then he slowly sits down on his bed. He grabs his phone from the table and starts scrolling. After some seconds he turns the screen towards me. There’s a selfie of him and another man lying in the grass. His face looks very serious. “Croatia”, he says, while imitating a walking motion with two fingers. He continues scrolling and stops when a photo of a woman and two children passes by. They are standing in a room. The woman has very long hair and is wearing red lipstick. The children are smiling. They can’t be older than ten years old. “Wife... son... daughter”, Mahmud says while pointing at each of them with a smile on his face. The next photo shows a completely destroyed room. There is nothing left but grey bricks of stone. “No home”, he says. He puts his phone down and starts making wild movements with his hands while making noise. “A bomb?”, I ask. He nods and grabs his phone again. He continues scrolling and stops at a photo of him and some other men standing on a porch. It’s dark, but they seem to be smiling. It was taken in the AZC in Wassenaar, Mahmud explains. “One more”, he says, while raising one finger. With the other hand he quickly starts scrolling. He stops at a photo of him and two other people.

⁵⁴ Mahmud, one year in the Netherlands, informal conversation, 14-04-2021

Mahmud is standing in the middle, with both his arms wrapped around the two persons. They are standing in the hallway of the AZC. All of them are smiling. He points at the two persons and says: "COA.. goodbye".

"The loss of relationships is often one of the most painful elements of the expulsion from home" (20), Taylor states (2015). This is true, Mahmud's story shows. Although his house was destroyed, he had to flee his homeland, and he has not had a permanent place to live ever since, the worst thing was to be torn apart from his wife and children. Nevertheless, he considers himself a lucky man, as he got to meet so many people along the way who helped him to get through this.

Just like Mahmud, my participants have had to rebuild a social network since their resettlement in Middelburg. Initially, many tend to surround themselves with other Syrians, which Jumana⁵⁵ explained as followed:

"They are from my own country. We speak the same language. That makes it easy to communicate. [...] And we try to maintain our Syrian traditions. We dance, sing, eat."⁵⁶

Relationships with Syrians create a sense of comfort and familiarity, which are two essential features of a sense of belonging, according to Antonsich's (2010) definition of place-belongingness. Among cultural factors, language evokes a sense of community as it makes you able to express yourself and feel understood exclusively by the people who know exactly what you are saying (Ignatief 1994). As such, "language can be felt as an element of intimacy which resonates with one's auto-biographical sphere" (Hooks 2009, 24). Moreover, being with other Syrians is a way to maintain Syrian traditions, as Jumana's quote explains. Traditions are used in recreating a feeling of home, while it reminds them of Syria. Besides, Jumana initiated a financial support network for Syrians in Middelburg in case someone has financial problems. It shows how social ties also provide one with sources for reciprocal exchange such as economic support (Taylor 2006, 215-18), meaning that Antonsich's (2010) relational and economic factors sometimes become intertwined. Altogether, these factors contribute to a sense of belonging, and explain why my participants surround themselves with Syrians.

However, experiencing a sense of belonging among Syrians living in the Netherlands is not enough to feel part of the Dutch society as well, as expressed by all participants. In order to reach this, social ties with Dutch people are rather important. My participants always told me that they appreciated Middelburg so much as a place because of small everyday interactions they had with

⁵⁵ Jumana, six years in the Netherlands, semi-structured interview, 11-03-2021

⁵⁶ Jumana, six years in the Netherlands, semi-structured interview, 11-03-2021

people on the street. Everywhere they went people said hello. Although Antonsich (2010) states that everyday interactions with people in public are not sufficient “to generate a sense of connectedness to others on which belonging relies (647)”, these small interactions were often the first small steps in meeting Dutch people. Besides, my participants felt like they were seen. Since people feel part of the community where they live when they feel like they are being seen and heard (Antonsich 2010, 650), this could explain why small interactions are nevertheless important in reshaping a sense of belonging.

However, my participants still emphasized the importance of creating social ties with Dutch people that go beyond having a chat with your neighbor sometimes. For those who go to school or have a job, it is relatively easy to get in contact with Dutch people, as they are automatically surrounded by them. For those who are not, places like the Pennywafelhuis form an accessible way to meet people. When I asked Samirah, one of the frequent visitors, why she likes being there, she answered:

“In this place we are happy. I feel free here. Here, many friends. Many women. Anda, Marlou. They are kind people. You want coffee, you want tea? This is something good.”⁵⁷

Besides offering a space to meet new people, the initiators of the Pennywafelhuis also help people with for instance calling advocates. Thus, the relationships built up here and the way they act as a source of support and help, add to a sense of belonging as well (Antonsich 2010, 647; Taylor 2015, 215-18).

Another example of getting into contact with Dutch people is by getting an integration buddy. However, as an integration buddy myself, I noticed with my buddies Rawan and Saousan that many times we ended up talking about cultural differences between us as a way of getting to learn more about each other lives. Thus, our conversations were dominated by what made us different from each other, instead of by what we had in common. As such, this could rather confirm their non-belonginess to the Dutch society. At the same time, in order to reshape a sense of belonging, one should feel free to express her/his identity (Antonsich 2010, 650) and cultural values and symbols in the host society (Buonfino and Thomson 2007, 17). Since the conversations we had offered space for expressing these elements, they simultaneously added to a sense of belonging, as they created a sense of acceptance and mutual understanding.

⁵⁷ Samirah, 2 years in the Netherlands, informal conversation, 13-04-2021

In this section I have demonstrated that creating social ties is crucial in order to generate a sense of belonging in a new environment. Building up relationships with Dutch people is often experienced as difficult, because initially it rather confronts them with their non-belonginess. Yet these relationships are essential in creating a sense of belonging to the Dutch society. With other Syrians, my participants find a sense of familiarity and comfort, which not only generates a sense of belonging to this group of people, but also is a way to connect with the live left behind, and still feel part of Syria. The ways in which memories and relationships from the past play a role in this, will be discussed in the next section.

4.3. Memories and past relationships

Abduljalil: "We can't go back to Syria, because the situation is not good. So we need to forget everything about Syria, because we have to live our new life."⁵⁸

Mohammed: "Yeah, we try to forget about Syria, about our childhood."⁵⁹

According to Antonsich (2010), experiences, relations, and memories from the past that attach a person to a particular place are an essential component of one's belonging to a place (647).

Abduljalil and Mohammed consider being reminded of Syria as an obstacle in rebuilding a life here. Nevertheless, they continue to stay in touch with those who form part of the memories from Syria they want to forget about. In line with this, Nisrin said the following:

"It makes me feel.. a part of something. Sometimes, because you will talk to them and hear about the news, that makes you very sad. But I still want to be with them. [...] To feel, to meet them. But if you want to feel belonging, and to miss them, all the time, that will make you in a very bad situation."⁶⁰

While staying in touch with people makes her still feel part of the life in Syria she once had, it also confronts her with the fact that she has lost this. Besides, being constantly reminded of this hinders her in reshaping a sense of belonging in the Netherlands, as it confronts her with the fact that she will never belong in the same way as in Syria.

⁵⁸ Abduljalil, two years in the Netherlands, semi-structured interview, 31-03-2021

⁵⁹ Mohammed, one year in the Netherlands, semi-structured interview, 31-03-2021

⁶⁰ Nisrin, six years in the Netherlands, semi-structured interview, 09-03-2021

For some of my participants, obtaining a Dutch passport makes it easier to allow past memories into their new life:

“Whenever I started talking to them, I started thinking about the past. It’s hard. But ever since I got my passport, I’ve been talking to them again. Because if I want to see them, it’s much easier now because I have the Dutch nationality.”⁶¹

Mohamad

Now that Mohamad has a passport, he is no longer scared to be confronted with his losses, because he can finally see his friends again with whom he has created his memories. For Jumana, it also means that she can finally see her family again. While obtaining a passport is the ultimate step in becoming a “full Dutch citizen”, at the same time it gives her the opportunity to finally go back to her homeland and be in the place and among the people where she has belonged to her whole life. As such, it adds to both her belonging to the Dutch society, as well as to her belonging to Syria. However, Nisrin decided that she never wants to go back to Syria:

“..even if my house is good, the people are gone. Most of them, you cannot want those memories, because they are dead because of hunger or they are shot. You can’t want to live that memories again. It’s harmful.”⁶²

The reason why she does not associate Syria with home anymore is because some of the people she belonged to and with whom she created these memories are no longer there. This is in line with Antonsich (2010), who states that “the continued presence of family members in that place, as well as memories of one’s ancestors, also contributes to feelings of place-belongingness (647)”.

Dib, Mohammed and Salah all grew up during the war and cannot remember much from before. According to Nagel and Steaheli (2008), vague or few memories naturally create a weaker emotional attachment to the home country, and consequently increase a sense of belonging towards the country of resettlement. Among my participants, I noticed that the youngest ones were indeed the ones who felt most belonging to the Netherlands. Besides being able to adapt more easily due to their young age, having less memories is another explanation why they tend to experience this more.

The memories of my participants and the way they are told and sometimes not told show that memories from the lost home can both be painful and comforting, which consequently has an impact

⁶¹ Mohamad, seven years in the Netherlands, semi-structured interview, 14-03-2021

⁶² Nisrin, six years in the Netherlands, semi-structured interview, 09-03-2021

on reshaping a sense of belonging in here. While memory is often considered as crucial in keeping the lost home alive, “memory may falter when the context or frame of memory - the house, the village, social networks - has been left behind” (14), as stated by Taylor (2015), which is also affirmed by Nisrin’s quote. However, my participants have also shown that even when they have left everything behind, it is possible to engage and allow past memories into their daily lives, through the maintenance of traditions for instance. As such, they can function as a “mechanism for dealing with the needs of the present and the future” (14), as put by Taylor (2015). In the next section we will look at how certain places can provide a space for the digestion of memories, while at the same time being a place where people rebuild (social) ties with and within their new environment.

4.4. Places for belonging

It is a Tuesday afternoon. Salah and I are walking around in his favorite park. There are birds chirping in the background. The sun shines through the leaves. Besides us there seems to be no one else. As we are walking he starts explaining that he often comes here at night, when the sun is down and there is no one left. At the end of the day he needs a moment for himself to let his thoughts sink in, organize his head, and find some rest, he explains. Not only Salah, but also residents from the AZC often come here to find peace and clear their mind. Van Liempt and Staring (2021) describe such places as ‘places of restoration’, which they define as “places with aesthetic qualities of beauty, where one can relax, empty one’s head, and forget about one’s worries, and where one’s level of energy is once again restored” (314). Many participants said that the large amount of such places in the city was what they liked so much about Middelburg. Ever since the start of the war their lives have been marked by chaos and unrest. The calmness and quietness they find here now gives them space to digest their experiences. Becoming familiar, feeling at ease, and gaining a sense of control is what make such places a source for reshaping a sense of belonging (Van Liempt and Staring 2021). This is also in line with Boccagni’s (2017) conceptualization of homemaking, which he describes as an active processes of establishing security, familiarity and a sense of control or autonomy in a new place.

Another place some of my participants go to is the mosque. Nisrin said the following about this:

“Once you enter the mosque it’s different, we’re all the same. Every time you go that place you can feel that peace inside you and you feel that it’s really a blessed place, without any bad feelings.”⁶³

⁶³ Nisrin, six years in the Netherlands, semi-structured interview, 21-03-2021

Van Liempt and Staring (2021) describe the mosque as a place that represents traditions, norms and values practiced in the country of origin, and as such offers a safe and familiar environment to explore the unfamiliar environment (310). Besides, feeling free and respected to express your own cultural symbols and values in a new society also define people's belonging to that society (17). The fact that Middelburg offers Nisrin a place to do this, therefore also adds to a sense of belonging. Nevertheless, Rawan explained that the mosque in Middelburg rather confronts her with what she has lost, since it looks completely different from the one she used to go to in Syria. Thus, while for the Nisrin the mosque offers a space to reshape a sense of belonging in Middelburg, for Rawan this rather hinders these processes.

Other places that represent certain cultural aspects from home and are therefore frequently visited by my participants are for example Syrian or Arabic restaurants and markets:

“Sometimes when we miss it, I will go to markets that is full of Arabic like in Antwerp... you see around Arabic shops, with Arabic products, with Arabic people in there. [...] I mean.. to feel your culture again, not to go to look for your home. Just to feel that you are from Islamic culture.”⁶⁴

Nisrin

While being in such places generates the process of establishing security and familiarity in a given place, going, exploring and discovering such places generates a sense of control and autonomy within their new environment. Moreover, places like mosques and shops, can also provide opportunities for social interaction and social inclusion (Buonfino and Thomson 2007, 18).

However, the first place where people feel home again, and what many still consider to be the only place where they feel this, is in their house. It is one of the few places they can shape in such a way that it adds to a sense of comfort, familiarity, intimacy and safety. This also gives them a sense of control and is a way to express their identity. Each of these factors are essential in reshaping a sense of belonging (Antonsich 2010). Every week when I visited Rawan at her house I found a new piece of decoration. When I asked her about the Arabic writings on the wall, she told me that in her home back in Syria they had a huge painting hanging on the wall with one of these writings. Having it here, gave her a some sense of being home as it reminded her of her home in Syria. As described by Van Liempt and Staring (2021), “material objects and decorating the house can be important means for coming to terms with past experiences of dispossession and enable people to reengage with everyday life”.

⁶⁴ Nisrin, six years in the Netherlands, semi-structured interview, 21-03-2021

For Rawan, remaking what has been taken away from her as a way to integrate past memories into her daily and future life, makes her able to move on.

Another place that is really important to some of my participants is the Pennywafelhuis. As described in the previous chapter by Maartje, it is a local community art project that offers a place for anyone who likes to come by and have a coffee, meet people, do something creative, or follow computer classes. On a Thursday morning I am sitting next to Entysar, a Syrian woman who also joins our weekly computer classes. We sit in silence while we are both making a drawing. When I ask her why she likes being here so much, she looks up and answers:

“I really feel at ease here. At home I always get tired, there are so many things to do. [...] Here, I feel free. Like I can breathe. My body relaxes as soon as I walk in. I can draw, knit.. It helps me to relax.”⁶⁵

The Pennywafelhuis is where Entysar feels at ease and free to do whatever she wants to do. As such, the Pennywafelhuis to some extent offers more sources to reshape feelings at home than her own home does. Others described it as a place where they can meet others that accept them for who they are. The extent in which people are respected, feel free and are given space to express their cultural values and symbols within a given society define people’s belonging to a place (Buonfino and Thomson 2007), and could explain why people like this place so much. In fact, all elements that contribute to “the home” according to Hooks (2009, 213), like familiarity, comfort, security, and emotional attachment, are found by my participants in the Pennywafelhuis, which explains why some even call it their second home. As such, the Pennywafelhuis offers people a safe space to feel home, in which they simultaneously become familiar with the Dutch culture and learn Dutch. The importance of learning Dutch will be discussed in the following section.

4.5. Dutch: the key to integration

“I want to learn Dutch, because I want to start a life here.”⁶⁶

Mohammed

To Mohammed, mastering the Dutch language stands almost equal to be able to live a life in the Netherlands. Among cultural factors, language is indeed considered very important in order to generate a sense of belonging (Buonfino and Thomson 2007, 17). With starting a life, Mohammed

⁶⁵ Entysar, 2 years in the Netherlands, informal conversation, 13-04-2021

⁶⁶ Mohammed, one year in the Netherlands, semi-structured interview, 31-03-2021

primarily refers to being able to go to school and finding a job, both essential components in reshaping a sense of belonging in the Dutch society. However, the importance of mastering the Dutch language goes much further than this according to Juan⁶⁷: it also makes you able to read letters from the government or read the newspapers. Thus, speaking Dutch does not only create the possibility to go to school for instance and as such adds to the feeling of having a future in a given place, but also makes you able to be involved in what people around you are concerned with, and as such adds to a sense of being part of a group of people.

About half of my participants already spoke English when they got here, which was as experienced as a benefit:

“If I don’t know how to express my ideas or tell my stories in Dutch, I can talk in English. That’s why it’s easy for me with Dutch people.”⁶⁸

Jumana

My participants who speak English were able to communicate with others from the first moment they got here, starting with people from COA in the AZC who could explain them about their procedures for instance. This did not only lead to less uncertainties in a life ruled by doubts, but also added to sense of autonomy, which is essential in the process of homemaking following Boccagni (2017). Besides, the presence of English in all layers of the Dutch society makes their new environment more familiar, which is also an essential component in homemaking (Boccagni 2017).

For those who are still residing in the AZC, opportunities to learn Dutch are partially hindered by bureaucratic procedures and rules. Besides not having a house in Middelburg yet and therefore still isolated from their Dutch fellow citizens, they are also not able to start working yet, which is one of the best ways to put their Dutch into practice. It shows that Antonsich’s (2010) cultural and legal factors are thus intertwined: while people have to achieve a certain level of Dutch to pass their integration exam, they are hindered from opportunities to practice Dutch exactly because of procedures and rules such as not having passed the integration exam. Once people have passed their integration exam, and have achieved a certain level of Dutch, they can start looking for a job. The ways in which a job adds to a sense of belonging, will be discussed in the following section.

⁶⁷ Juan, job coach at Orionis and once a refugee (from Syria) himself, semi-structured interview, 22-04-2021

⁶⁸ Jumana, six years in the Netherlands, semi-structured interview, 11-03-2021

4.6. Working: independence, acknowledgement and status

Having a job was mentioned as one of the most important elements contributing to a sense of belonging. Working was firstly described as a way of getting to know Dutch people, becoming familiar with Dutch cultural rules, and practicing Dutch, and therefore adds to their sense of belonging. Secondly, work gives my participants the feeling they are contributing to society, and therefore makes them feel more of a “full citizen”, like Rawan put it. As they no longer depend on welfare, they are finally rid of the label of “a foreigner who is exploiting the Dutch government”, Rawan continued. She felt proud to say she was earning her own money now, just like any other Dutch person, and perceived to be more respected and have a higher status. This in line with Trifu (2014), who states that work is central for belonging since “being accepted and acknowledged for who one is, for one’s strengths and capacities can be achieved through recognized work (59)”. Thus, not only does it change one’s social position within our society, but also the way their social identification in our society is perceived by both themselves and others (Yuval-Davis, 2006). My participants also said that earning their own money increased the feeling of being economically safe, which is an essential feature of place-belongingness according to Antonsich (2010, 648). For some, it also meant they could finally send money to relatives in Syria. Thus, while working is a way of building new social ties in the Netherlands, it is simultaneously a way of maintaining ties with Syria.

While many of my participants do volunteer work, this still feels like “fake-participation”, and rather confronts them with their non-belonging. Besides not getting any rewards for their work, it often implies skills below their educational level. As such, people do not find satisfaction and acknowledgement in a volunteer job, often leading to even more confrontation with people’s losses, and the way their social position in society has changed. While the benefits (eg. practice Dutch) add to a sense of belonging, at the same time their belonging is constantly doubted. However, even with a paid job people do not always find recognition:

“The job I have is good, but it’s not my own profession. Unfortunately.. It’s something I hadn’t expected here. I thought that I would find myself a good job, since I have a lot of experience as a teacher. But I was shocked that I couldn’t chase my dreams here. I’ll have to accept it.”⁶⁹

Jumana

⁶⁹ Jumana, six years in the Netherlands, semi-structured interview, 19-02-2021

Coming from a high regarded function as a teacher, Jumana did not find the same acknowledgement in the Netherlands. Not being valued for what she is actually capable of, and not being able to chase her dreams, do not have a positive effect on her belonging here.

The stories of my participants have shown that although work and having an income do not directly determine one's belonging to a place, "the condition of being fully and successfully integrated into a given economy" nevertheless plays a big role in reshaping a sense of belonging, following Antonsich (2010, 648). As such, it also creates future perspective for my participants. Moreover, people feel valued and recognized through the status a job comes with, and feel they contribute to the Dutch economy (Buonfino and Thomson 2007, 16). When opportunities for work do not appear, people start doubting their social position even more, and consequently also their belonging to this place.

Conclusion



5. Conclusion

Ever since the start of the refugee crisis in 2013, numbers of Syrians came to the Netherlands looking for a new place to live. Once obtained a permanent residence, their search for ways to reshape a sense of belonging and feeling at home began. This is a process characterized by many obstacles. In this qualitative research we have explored the ways in which Syrian status holders in Middelburg reshape these feelings, and how organizations, institutions and projects contribute this, taking integration as a point of departure. Belonging means to be part of something and is mostly defined by one's culture, identity and rights. It connects people to others and leads to a sense of being valued and recognized. A lack of belonging explains why people do not feel at home in a new place (Buonfino 2017, 6). Using Antonsich's (2010), Yuval-Davis's (2010) and Buonfino's (2017) conceptualizations of belonging and home, we have tried to explain how a sense of belonging and feeling at home are reshaped by Syrians, and how perceptions on integration as directed by organizations, institutions and projects are interwoven with this process. In the following paragraphs we will discuss our main complementary findings and conclude that while actors concerned with integration state that participating in the city outside the house is the only way to a sense of belonging to the Dutch society, the outside world as experienced by Syrian status holders rather confronts them with their non-belonging to the Dutch society.

5.1. Belonging versus non-belonging

Syrians initially tend to surround themselves with other Syrians after arriving here, as this generates a sense of familiarity and security. Sharing stories, speaking their mother tongue and preserving Syrian traditions forms a bridge to past memories, and is a way of maintaining ties with the lost home. Although they all come from different parts of Syria, in this unfamiliar environment they suddenly have a lot in common. Nevertheless, experiencing a sense of belonging among Syrians living in the Netherlands is not enough to feel part of the Dutch society as well.

The road to get there however, has many obstacles. For some, the unknown and unfamiliar is something that initially prevents them from actively participating in the city. For years their lives have been marked by uncertainty and danger, while some still suffer from traumas. Their new home is the first place in all these years that offers them a safe space to digest their experiences. It is a place where they feel safe and secure, one that they can turn into a familiar space, and where they are free to be who they are (Duyvendak 2017). However, as soon as they step out of that safe space, they enter an unsafe and unfamiliar environment again. While a sense of belonging in Syria was once so natural that they were not even aware of it, in this new environment they are constantly confronted with their

non-belonging. This sense of non-belonging arises from the absence of tools that make one feel part of society (eg. speaking Dutch, a job), but most importantly is the result of the way their social position in the Dutch society is defined by their social identification as determined by Dutch people (Yuval-Davis 2006). This essentialized identity, which is based only on their ethnicity and religious background, positions them as opposed to “the typical Dutchman”, leading to a distance that is experienced as unbridgeable, even after obtaining a Dutch passport (Antonsich 2010). However, as opposed to the experiences of Syrians, actors involved in the integration of status holders claim that the only way to belonging is by getting out of the house and actively participating in the city. This contradiction will be further outlined in the following paragraph.

5.2. Participate your way to a place that feels like home

Ideologically speaking, the final destination of integration is when a status holder feels at home and belongs in the city of Middelburg. Yet, making status holders with a complete different cultural background than your own feel at home and belong is not easy and takes both time and effort. Although many initiatives, practices and organizations in Middelburg make effort to support the integration of the status holders and to blend in the city, difficulties to the integration and to make people feel like they belong are always present. Dutch society and obligations concerning integration are perceived as very demanding, both legally and cultural as much is expected from the status holders to do in order to integrate. Although integration should always come from two ways, it is blurry to what extend the status holders are perceived to adjust, and to what extend it is accepted that they ‘stick to their own culture’. To overcome these difficulties, status holders are expected to take on an active role in society. Participating in society is hereby perceived as the key to integration and the creation of a sense of belonging. However, it is not directly mentioned in the conceptualization of integration of both Ager and Strang (2008) and Phillimore (2012), while it does contribute to all factors of integration and should therefore be considered as an overarching practice of integration processes. Participation entails leaving the house and being actively and regularly among other inhabitants of Middelburg on a very local and small-scale level to keep it familiar and accessible. This eventually contributes to learning Dutch faster, building up sustainable relationships, getting to understand both written and unwritten (cultural) rules of society and finding a job. As such, people gradually start to feel more familiar and more secure, and consequently will start to feel at home in the city and thus outside their own house as well. Participating in society therefore adds to the creation of a sense belonging according to the factors of both Antonsich (2010) and Buonfino and Thomson (2007): the legal, economic, cultural, relational and physical.

While the latter group of participants considers participation as the ultimate tool in integration, for Syrian status holders participation increases their sense of belonging as much as it decreases it. For example, many Syrians start off with volunteer work as a way to participate, and although they know and feel that meeting Dutch people, practicing Dutch and learning about the Dutch culture add to a sense of belonging, the absence of aspects involved in a real job as they used to have, like acknowledgement, status, financial safety, and future perspective, rather confirms their non-belongingness, and confronts them with the way their social position in society has changed. In other words, it rather emphasizes the differences between them and their fellow citizens and consequently does not lead to a sense of belonging.

5.3. At home in the house or at home in the city?

As mentioned before, the house is the place where Syrian status holders feel most at home, while the outside world is where they are constantly confronted with their non-belongingness. Reshaping a feeling of home outside the house therefore remains a struggle. Looking through the lens of integration policies in Middelburg, the house is indeed perceived as a safe place. However, it is simultaneously the place where people tend to 'fall back' on their own culture, while it is understood that the only way to integration and eventually a feeling of home and belonging is through participation in the city or neighborhood, and thus leaving the house.

The way that notions of home and sense of belonging relate to each other thus highly depends on the specific context and perspectives. To feel at home in Middelburg and among others is approached as a goal of integration. Thus, practices of integration and reshaping a sense of belonging eventually contribute to feeling at home. As such, a lack of belonging indeed explains why people do not feel at home in a new place (Buonfino and Thomson 2007, 6). Nevertheless, even when people do not experience any sense of belonging in their new environment, they can still feel at home in their house, showing that a sense of belonging is not a requirement to feel at home in certain contexts. This also means that not all factors (eg. legal factors, economic factors) of Antonsich's place-belongingness, which he describes as being at home in a place (2010, 645), are necessary in order to feel at home in a specific place. However, in order to feel home in the Dutch society, a sense of belonging is nevertheless crucial, in which all factors of place-belongingness contribute to this.

Although faced with obstacles, people nevertheless continue trying to reshape a sense of belonging. In this process, projects and social initiatives like the "integration buddy" project and the Pennywafelhuis play an important role. The Pennywafelhuis is a place where people find a sense of comfort, acceptance, recognition and safety. Since these are all essential features in belonging

(Buonfino and Thomson 2007), this explains why some even call it their second home. As such, this place forms a bridge between people's safe space and participation in the Dutch society, and could therefore be considered as the best example of how integration can lead to a sense of belonging.

In sum, the constant confrontation with being different rather leads to a sense of non-belonging to the Dutch society among Syrian status holders, than a sense of belonging. However, participants form organizations, institutions and projects involved in integration recognize that by participating actively, differences could be overcome as mutual understanding can be established. In this process, the house is a critical place which contributes on the one hand to a safe and familiar environment for Syrian status holders, while on the other hand it is a place that withdraws them from participating, and thus integrating fully in society. Although Syrian status holders will never be seen or identify themselves as a “full Dutch citizen”, they have learned that this does not mean they cannot feel at home in the Netherlands. Over time, they manage to create a bubble of familiar places and people that make them feel safe and at ease. However hard this may be, in order to create such a safe space around them, they must overcome obstacles that initially contradict feelings of belonging and home.

5.4. Discussion

Although we are very pleased with the findings and results of the research that we have been working on for the past nine months, there are some final remarks and constraints that we would like to make clear. Doing anthropological research often implies that the course of fieldwork never goes as planned. Although we did our fieldwork in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that there were quite some restrictions in all parts of (social) life, we did not expect to be able to meet so many people and to be able to conduct participant observation as much as we did. We started our fieldwork in a very ‘open to everything that comes our way’ manner, and had quite a broad range of topics to research, taking into consideration that gathering a lot of specific and personal data would probably be challenging given the current circumstances. Nevertheless, we came back with plenty of data, experiences and beautiful personal stories. Although we have tried our very best to incorporate as many perspectives as possible, and to give all participants a voice, we were unfortunately not able to incorporate all of these experiences and personal perspectives.

Moreover, the Syrians we got to meet only form a small percentage of the total number of Syrians in Middelburg. Given the fact that most of them were already participating in the city quite actively, we cannot tell whether their stories are exactly in line with those who did not. Besides, as we only had a limited amount of time to conduct fieldwork, it was not possible to get to speak to all actors

in Middelburg that play a role in the lives of Syrian newcomers and their search for a sense of belonging. Perceptions from Dutch fellow-citizens of Middelburg or language institutions for instance, would also have been very relevant in order to get a more complete understanding of our research topics.

During the course of our research we also found out that people's gender and age play a very important role in the way status holders (are able to) integrate and reshape a sense of belonging. Although we made sure that people from all generations and genders were equally represented in our research population, we have come to conclude that focusing on a specific gender or age group would have probably increased the validity of our research. For any further research we suggest that especially gender differences should get more focus, as different perspectives on gender roles between cultures turned out to be highly intertwined with the way Syrian status holders are approached in the Dutch society and integration policies, and how a sense of belonging is reshaped.

Last, we want to point out that although we have discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic might have impacted processes of homemaking and belonging based on stories told by participants, we never got to do research in a context in which COVID-19 was not present. In order to validate their stories, it would be interesting to see whether the way these processes have been experienced has changed after the pandemic.

Nevertheless, we believe that our research in Middelburg has led to the creation of a more comprehensive and holistic view on notions of home, belonging and integration. The knowledge of the two perspectives as examined in this research has led to an interesting contribution to the relationship between home and a sense of belonging, taking integration as a point of departure. Moreover, we also think that our research offers interesting perspectives to take into consideration by the designers of the new integration policy in Middelburg. All municipalities in the Netherlands are currently creating new integration policies for status holders, which implies that municipalities instead of status holders themselves become more responsible for their integration process⁷⁰. Since our research offers perspectives from people that are going through these processes themselves, we think that our research can be very relevant in creating a better understanding of their needs.

Finally, we hope that by listening to people's stories, working for organizations and projects as volunteers, and bringing it all together in this thesis, we have had a positive impact on their experiences of belonging and home as well.

⁷⁰ "Gemeenten in startblokken voor nieuw integratiebeleid," VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, October 9, 2018, [Gemeenten in startblokken voor nieuw integratiebeleid | Zuidwest-Nederland | VluchtelingenWerk Nederland](#).

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