Article

States of Intimacy: Refugee Parents, Anxiety, and the Spectral State in Denmark

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Abstract: This article examines the ways in which parenting practices of refugee parents are the object of concern for the Danish welfare state. Emphasis is placed on how interventions of daycare institutions and other welfare professionals have been experienced by refugee families who live in a context of radical uncertainty since they hold temporary residence permits in Denmark. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with families spanning several years, I analyze the experiences of a number of refugee families from Syria and Iran. Drawing on what has been called "the spectral turn" or "hauntology" in anthropology, I argue that welfare state belonging causes ambiguity for families who appreciate protection and sometimes family-like care from state agents but also fear its repercussions. As a result, I argue that relationships between refugee parents and agents of the welfare state are characterized not only by "fear of proximity" but also by "intimate distance", since refugee parents experience "the system" as being nowhere in particular but potentially everywhere.

Keywords: refugees; parenting; state; day-care; intimacy; asylum system

1. Introduction

On a gray winter day in 2017, I visited Sara[1], an Iranian woman in her mid-thirties, a journalist and skilled painter. During our conversation, my gaze kept returning to a painting, which hung on the relatively bare white walls in the apartment of the social housing area where she lived with her husband and young daughter. The painting depicted a tree in the shape of a woman with eyes closed, whose black hair reached upwards like branches arching towards a blue sky. The neck and body of the woman in a dream-like fashion resembled the trunk of a tree with deep roots embedded into the snow-covered soil. Above her face as part of her black unruly hair, a clock emerged, one whose numbers were confusingly out of place, as if indicating that (bureaucratic) time was out of sync with her internal reality. The clock was adjacent to a small red Danish flag intimately placed like an ornament in her hair. Noticing my interest in the painting, Sara told me that she had painted this herself when she was in the asylum-seeking phase, awaiting a verdict from "the system". She explained that the flag represented her hope that she might one day be granted asylum in Denmark. She then showed me her little pink social security card, a card which certifies that she holds a temporary residence permit in Denmark, and said with tears in her eyes, "This card is my mother and my father".

This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2016 and 2020.[2] I initially established contact with a number of refugee families through the collective research project "The Encounter between Refugee Children, their Families, and Danish Day-Care Institutions". Through this project, I got to know several refugee families living at asylum centers in Denmark or in social housing areas in different municipalities surrounding the Copenhagen area. Additionally, with several subsequent research projects carried out in different municipalities in Denmark, I have followed some of these families over several years, leading to a long-term analysis of their process from arrival in Denmark to settling as families in a new context while simultaneously finding their feet as parents. The way in

which Sara referred to the social security card as a parental figure shows us that her sense of security depended on a parentlike protection by the Danish state.[3] Yet, as we shall see, this relationship was highly ambiguous, to the point that she sometimes felt haunted by it.

2. Imagining the State

The interrelationship between kinship and the state has been widely studied in sociology and anthropology (Habermas 1989; Ariès [1960] 1996; Herzfeld 1997; Jackson 2007; Hage 1996; Andrikopoulos and Duyvendak 2020). Jürgen Habermas famously argued that the rise of the "rational-critical public sphere" in early modern Europe was initially seen as an extension and completion of the intimate sphere of family life (Habermas 1989, p. 50).[4] In a similar manner, in *Intimating Culture*, anthropologist Michael Herzfeld found that national polities both encapsulate local and familial forms of identity, as well as draw their primary imagery from them (Herzfeld 1997, 2004). Ghassan Hage, another anthropologist who has studied the mechanisms of nationalism, has noted that "family" across societies evokes images of both maternal care and patriarchal control, and this is carried over into images of the state (Hage 1996, pp. 472–77).

In order to examine what I call "states of intimacy", I draw inspiration from what has been termed "the spectral turn" or "hauntology" within anthropology (Good 2019; Desjarlais 2018; Gammeltoft 2014). These approaches build on the work of Sigmund Freud and Martin Heidegger. Freud's well-known notion of the uncanny (*unheimlich*) (Freud [1919] 1963) plays a significant role in Heidegger's philosophy, where human beings, according to Heidegger, do not feel at-home-in-the-world, and when confronted with this, they are thrown into anxiety (*angst*) (Heidegger [1953] 2010). Tine Gammeltoft's term "spectral kinship" is particularly evocative for the cases examined in this article. Gammeltoft proposes the term "spectral kinship" in her attempt to understand how Vietnamese women endure domestic violence. She argues that in order to do so, we must look beyond the immediately tangible. Spectral kinship, according to Gammeltoft, involves "inchoate dimensions of relatedness that exceed the kinship arrangements that anthropologists have most often studied" (Gammeltoft 2021, p. 23). I propose that such an approach is also useful for understanding the Danish welfare state, since intimacy does not entail closeness per se; there is always more than meets the eye. Therefore, it is important to examine "the emotional and imaginative forces at play when people enact kinship, thereby drawing attention to the socially invisible work that produces and maintains relatedness" (Gammeltoft 2021, p. 23). According to this analytic, paraphrasing Gammeltoft, I look not only at "specters of kinship" but also "specters of statehood".

Sara's image of the state, as was the case for many of my refugee interlocutors, was fundamentally ambiguous, both intimate and distant, and partly incomprehensible as conveyed by the hegemonic yet nonsensical clock. The terms "intimate" and "distant" sound like a contradiction in terms, but this ambiguity may paradoxically lie at the heart of how the state is imagined by refugees like Sara. In other words, intimacy does not necessarily entail closeness or rapport. In their book Collaborative Damage, Mikkel Bunkenborg et al. (2022) use the term "intimate distance" to describe encounters between Chinese (hegemonic) entrepreneurs in sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia and local workers. Drawing on Michael Herzfeld's (2004) "cultural intimacy", the authors define relations characterized by "intimate distance" as relations "that cannot meaningfully be described as close, yet are diffused with an intensity that equals, and in some cases even surpasses, what arises from connections of proximity (Bunkenborg et al. 2022, p. 30). According to the authors, the concept is meant to capture "the totality of imperial relations that hover between the personal and the political; between attraction and repulsion; between curiosity and ignorance; and of which it is characteristic that gaps, chasms, and fissures and imbued with as much social efficacy, and as much moral virtue, as unisons, sympathies, and connections. (ibid 2022)".

With this notion in mind, in the following, I will move on to consider how the state is intimately present in family life in Denmark's social housing areas.

3. Parenting and the Proximity of the State

On a chilly morning in 2019, I was on my way to carry out fieldwork in a welfare state institution called "The Family Center". I clearly recall passing a large billboard depicting a group of blond politicians in a family-like Christmas setting, toasting cheerfully. The slogan read "We care about Denmark" (*Vi holder af Danmark*). It was an advertisement for the Danish right-wing party *Dansk Folkeparti*, placed in the middle of a so-called ghetto, made up largely of people with immigrant backgrounds a few blocks from The Family Center.

Seen from the outside, the center looks like a family bungalow, placed oddly between tall concrete buildings. The center was a partnership between the local municipality in a suburb of Copenhagen and a philanthropic NGO, which provides various forms of "early intervention", targeting (vulnerable) mothers/parents under the age of 30 and their children, many of whom have refugee or immigrant backgrounds. The Family Center was defined as an intervention based on proximity (*fremskudt indsats*), in which the work of this collaboration between the municipality and the NGO was to be based on proximity, i.e., rather than being placed at the town hall, it was located in the middle of a social housing area, which had been defined as a "hard ghetto". It is noteworthy that the term "*fremskudt indsats*" originates from military language and refers to situations where defense is placed in front of the first line of defense and intervention. The center's aim was to provide advice for young parents in line with an ethos of "early interventions", whereby concerns should be addressed before they turn into actual social problems. Such state interventions sought to overcome the challenges believed to be inherent in social housing areas, areas that had been politically designated as "ghettoes" and "parallel societies" (Indenrigs-og boligministeriet [Ministry of the Interior and Housing] 2021). These areas were defined through the criteria of high crime rates, low employment rates, low income and educational level, and with a large proportion of people with ethnic backgrounds other than Danish. As Johansen and Jensen (2017, p. 299) have pointed out, urban regeneration is "not only about buildings (. . .), it is a rather expansive biopolitical project".

Entering the Family Center where I had carried out fieldwork since 2018, I immediately stepped into a cozy, though somewhat artificial, sense of homeliness: the smell of coffee and newly baked bread, people speaking in subdued voices, mothers resting in the soft couches (some breastfeeding), and babies were passed from arm to arm. Next to the sofas, a bulletin with bright posters displayed information about techniques of childrearing, advice on combatting domestic violence, how to overcome mental health issues, invitations to "career cafes", and various other forms of psycho-social counselling that were carried out by an interdisciplinary team of social workers: a pediatric nurse, a psychologist, a daycare worker, a midwife, a case worker, and a job consultant.

In my interviews and conversations with welfare professionals, they provided somewhat contradictory answers when explaining to what extent the Family Center was a unit separate from the work of the municipality. A social worker, Pia, described the idea behind the "*fremskudt indsats*" (early intervention based on proximity) in the following way:

> We cannot become a bubble disconnected from the wider society. The case workers at the municipality may have up to 20 cases per day. Here, we may have just a few. This means that we have more time; we can be more caring. However, I have come to realize not just the importance of time, but also of the environment. In the beginning, it was hard for me to get used to giving people hugs and the fact that we can be . . . like this . . . seated in soft chairs. But it really makes all the difference.

This description is in line with Mikkel Rytter's (2010, p. 308) finding that "relationships between case workers and clients, teachers and pupils, and medical staff and patients (and one might add Danes and foreigners or majorities and minorities) are all modelled on the structures of authority and intimacy found within the family". Rytter has examined this close yet distant relationship by arguing that the current immigration regime is based on and legitimized by certain kinds of kinship images through which migrants are destined to remain not just "other", but "alien". Among these, the colloquial term "the family of

Denmark" (*familien Danmark*) is an important cultural trope that has a productive force in *naturalizing* processes of nationalist boundary making (ibid., p. 308).

In Denmark, the Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen, has even stated that she aims to be the "Prime Minister for the children". Through this statement, she has directly targeted parenting as a politically significant issue, one through which insiders and outsiders are defined. Frederiksen in her 2022 New Year's speech emphasized a need to overcome the "fear of proximity" with regard to the parenting style of minority parents:[5]

> Some parents are given too many chances. Maybe this stems from good intentions, but when a 12-year-old is removed from the home, this has probably been preceded by 11 years of neglect. Therefore, the anxiety of proximity (*berøringsangst*) must be put aside, also in relation to other cultures. Some parents come from countries where violence against children is permitted. It is not permitted in Denmark. In Denmark, it is forbidden to hit one's children.

The Danish term "*berøringsangst*" is not easily translatable into English; it literally means "touch anxiety". I have translated it into "anxiety of proximity" to convey that it denotes a tendency to shy away from problems, a certain kind of anxiety which leads to strategies of avoidance. Frederiksen here explicitly linked "other cultures" to "cultures of violence", which seems very much in line with a populist tendency, in which the Social Democrats (*Socialdemokraterne*) have (re)gained a lot of previously lost voters from the right-wing Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*). Following this political emphasis on a need to separate more children from socially deprived and malfunctioning families, a new decree called Children First (*Børnene Først*) is underway and is expected to be implemented during 2022. It remains to be seen how these changes regarding the rights of the child will be enforced, but these policy changes have already had repercussions among social workers, in particular, in social housing areas and vis-à-vis refugee and migrant families.

4. Spectral States

During a visit to a suburb of Copenhagen in 2020 when I interviewed a Kurdish Iraqi woman, Bayan, the shadowy and haunting dimension of the state, which by refugees is often referred to as "the system", became particularly clear to me. Bayan had come to Denmark 15 years earlier and was working in the municipality as part of a collaborative effort among midwives, social workers, and day-care workers, who carried out interventions aiming to ensure the wellbeing and integration of newly arrived refugee families in Denmark. Quite early in our conversation, she turned the tables and asked me a question that caught me by surprise, "Have you seen the film The Hunt (*Jagten*) she asked me calmly but with alert eyes as she was pouring tea into her cup. She was referring to a film by renowned Danish director Thomas Vinterberg, which portrays the story of a male day-care worker, played by the actor Mads Mikkelsen, who is falsely accused of being a pedophile (Bregnbæk 2021, p. 144). Through the film, we see how he gradually breaks down as all his social relationships become steeped with hostility and mistrust. Her point in bringing up the film was to make a comparison with a story of a Syrian refugee family whose children had been removed by the Danish authorities. According to Bayan, the misunderstanding began when a day-care worker had noticed a bruise on the leg of a Syrian boy in the kindergarten. Suspicion arose that he had been beaten by his father. This had caused a particular day-care worker to act on her suspicion and to file a case against the father. Bayan went on to explain that in the same way that the male day-care worker in the film at one point faced a great risk of being seen as a pedophile, fathers with Arab backgrounds risk being seen as perpetrators of violence against women and children.

Bayan explained how the Syrian family had been in Denmark for only nine months and could speak very little Danish. The boy had been interviewed by an interpreter and his account seemed to be distorted and misunderstood, thus resulting in the removal of the boy from the family and eventually the couple's two other children as well. "They were devastated", she said. After a long and painful process, which lasted one and a half years, the case went through re-trial, and the children were reunited with their parents.

Bayan explained that nothing this family had endured (their flight, the atrocities they had experienced prior to leaving Syria) was as terrible as having lost their children. The family's version of the story was that the boy had become bruised by falling on his bike. "They will never recover from this. Their trust in the Danish system [*systemet*] has been lost forever", she said. And yet, despite this situation of fundamental "*unheimlichness*" (Heidegger [1953] 2010), they continued to depend on the protection of a society in which they did not feel at home and struggled to create viable futures for their children. During my fieldwork, I found that a more or less diffuse fear of losing one's child was quite widespread among refugees among whom the state's surveillance of their parenting practices represented a sense of looming threat (Johansen and Jensen 2017, p. 17). In the following I will look more closely at how the spectral quality of the state brings into focus what Peter Geschiere has called "the darker sides of intimacy" (Geschiere 2013).

5. Fear of Losing One's Child

When I first visited Amira and Faisal, both Iranian Kurds, in their late twenties, their apartment struck me as spotlessly clean. A tray filled with cake, dates, and fruit was neatly arranged on a low table placed on a Persian rug. As we were admiring the view from their flat, which was placed on the top floor of a high multi-story building, they told me about how relieved they were to have found their apartment, even though it was located in one of the areas defined as a "hard ghetto" on the Danish governments' ghetto list. This characterization made no sense to Amira, who on several occasions stressed that she was more afraid of the police patrolling the area than of the notorious youth gangs that sometimes roamed around. Faisal's cousin was also present. Amira and Faisal only briefly introduced him, and later in the conversation, it became clear to me that he was residing in the detention center Sjælsmark since his request for asylum had been denied. He visited them on this particular Saturday, but he had to report back to the center before curfew at 9 o'clock. He remained taciturn and low-key throughout the meeting, only smiling momentarily when approached by their adorable and lively toddler, Rozerin. His presence seemed like a very literal and uncanny reminder that as refugees holding temporary residence permits, their security could not be taken for granted (see also Bregnbæk 2022).

Amira and Faisal during our conversation told me about how they had been evicted from their previous apartment. A neighbor continuously complained about them because their baby, Rozerin, was crying. Amira explained that she was so exhausted from not sleeping at night. Things went from bad to worse when their landlord refused to renew their contract, and they were de facto evicted from their apartment. Faisal added with great agitation that a social worker had told them that "if we did not find an apartment, the municipality might take Rozerin away from us!" This had clearly been a very traumatic time for them, and the conversation continued to revolve around this specific case worker from the municipality. This stressful situation took a heavy toll on Amira, who later found out that she had post-partum depression. She explained that it had been near impossible for them to find another place to rent. "We were soooo happy when we found this place", she exclaimed.

This story highlights how refugee families depend on the protection of the state and experience acute fear of having to return to the oppressive regimes from which they fled. In this way, they live in a situation of radical uncertainty and anxiety in Denmark. Faisal put it in this way, "No one understands this, I mean people in Iran cannot understand that, because they think that since we have arrived in Denmark, one of the most liberal societies in Europe with a strong welfare state, we must consider ourselves fortunate and safe. In some ways this is true . . . ", and as he said this, he cast a glance at his cousin, who sat quietly in the couch barely uttering a word during our long conversation. "But it is a new kind of uncertainty, and the only protection one has is through working, even night work, cleaning, work that is unskilled, but it is work, and this is what the system cares about".

When explaining how they managed to cope with such a tough situation, Amira mentioned that a pediatric nurse who came to her for a home visit had urged her to go to

the Family Center. "This was really helpful for me. People there were so kind and caring", she said. She also made a close friend there. Besides this, she emphasized that it had been helpful for her to take part in a "career café" where she could get advice on how to continue her education. "I like the fact that childcare, career advice . . . everything was accessible at the same place". She wanted to become a nurse and had been guided as to how to apply and which language requirements should be in place first. Getting out of the house and meeting other mothers had also been beneficial to her, she said. When I asked her why she no longer took part in the activities of the center, she fell silent and evaded my questions. For instance, she replied with a smile that she preferred going to Fitness World than the post-partum gym offered at the center. Although I have no way of knowing for sure, I sensed that this kind of help was ambiguous to her and that she wished to safeguard a sense of family privacy.

Another Kurdish interlocutor, Sara, once confided in me about a highly intimate concern. She confessed that one day, she had been shopping in her local supermarket, and her daughter, Senour, then three-years-old, was tired and making a big fuss, yelling and screaming. Sara told me that she lost her temper, slapped her on the cheek in an outburst of frustration, and told her to calm down. A man noticed the incident and approached her. "Did you slap her?" he asked. "In Denmark, we do not hit our children", he asserted. "I was so ashamed", she said. She continued by explaining that she agreed with this policy and found many good values in Danish pedagogical norms. She also did not want to slap Senour, and she regretted it instantly. However, now she was worried. Might he report her to the municipality? And could she risk losing her child? Sara said that she could not forget this experience and often thought about it.

This experience conveys what I have termed a "spectral state". To Sara, the "system" appeared as a ghost-like entity, which can suddenly materialize through the comment of a neighbor in a supermarket. It tells us about an experience of a state, which is nowhere in particular and potentially everywhere. According to Gammeltoft (2021, p. 23), the *mundus imaginalis* is neither "imaginary", in the sense of being a delusion, nor "factual" and empirically observable. Rather, from a phenomenological point of view, it is somewhere in between. The fact that Sara kept returning to this episode can be seen as an instance of feeling haunted, not only by her own feelings of inadequacy as a mother, but by a spectral state hovering over her. In the following ethnographic case, I discuss more in-depth what is at stake in the intersection between refugee families and day-care institutions.

6. Parental Cooperation and Intimate Distances

Immediately upon arrival in Denmark, refugees are expected to take part in an integration program, and children must be enrolled in day-care or school (Bregnbæk et al. 2017). As in other Scandinavian countries, day-care is regarded as an integral part of the healthy development of children.[6] While the declared political aim of kindergartens is to offer equal opportunities to all children, some education researchers highlight the role kindergartens may play in exacerbating existing inequalities.[7] During my fieldwork, I have examined how this relationship was often full of dilemmas. Here, I will recount the story of a Syrian family I have followed over several years. The mother Nadia and her four-year-old daughter, Aisha, had been recently reunited with their husband/father, Ali, who had fled to Denmark before they did. For Aisha, this separation from her father had been highly traumatic, and she was afraid of being abandoned in the kindergarten. When alone in the kindergarten, she would make a big fuss by crying loudly when having to say goodbye to her parents, and when planes were visible in the sky, she would have fits of anxiety as she sought refuge under tables or chairs in search of security. She feared that bombs would fall on all of them. The day-care workers were worried about her, and in the beginning, they went to great lengths to be flexible and caring and to come up with ways to make Aisha feel safe and at home in the kindergarten (Bregnbæk 2019, pp. 202–204).[8]

However, in spite of this initially caring and flexible approach, over time the relationship between their family and the kindergarten became increasingly complicated. The

day-care workers were concerned about Aisha's overall development, in particular, her language skills, but also her social skills. The day-care workers were worried, since they felt obliged to prepare Aisha for the transition to school and found her parents unwilling to "cooperate". They found Aisha to be unruly and undisciplined vis-à-vis the norms of conduct in the kindergarten and either too anti-social or too dominating around the other children. They were concerned about Nadia's ability to "set boundaries" and "create structure" for Aisha. In an interview with the day-care workers, one day-care worker put it like this:

> You know, we don't know what she [Nadia] has been exposed to, which traumas she might have passed on to the child. It is hard to know if her hard disk was deleted when she was pregnant under those circumstances, and they have lived in a basement (. . .) It is a matter of looking into how we can help this family to function as a family. Also, because Aisha runs the family, she is the one who decides when the flat is cleaned, when they go to bed, and stuff like that. She decides when to eat or not to eat. She is such a strong-willed child.

Among the day-care workers, I often heard this assumption that "Aisha runs the family" as a logical extension of the fact that often they could not make her comply with eating times and other planned activities in the kindergarten. In this comment, we clearly see how the boundaries between the public and the private are porous and unclear. Although she never said so directly, it was clear to me that it was no coincidence that Nadia increasingly attempted to pick up her children quickly and to avoid questions from the day-care workers.

At a meeting between Aisha's parents, two day-care workers, and a language teacher that I attended, the main day-care worker reprimanded the family for the fact that Aisha was often absent or arrived too late in the morning. They feared that this had a negative influence on her Danish skills and overall wellbeing. The language pedagogue put it like this: "So, we have prepared a language test. And well . . . it is a little different, since she lacks Danish language skills. The maximum points attainable are 60, and at less than 47, there is a need for more help. Her score is 42, and her language proficiency is at a level 12".

Both parents looked worried and perplexed, not immediately able to decipher this cryptic message. Aisha later confessed to me that she could not understand the language of "the system", indicating her sense of fear and alienation. Such audit culture can take on ghostly or "spectral forms" in the sense that it is not clear to parents what is being assessed by "the system".

The language pedagogue continued: "Aisha is absent too much of the time. It is ok to be absent due to sickness once in a while or to be on holidays, but you also have a responsibility as parents to ensure that she is present. Otherwise, she will not become prepared to start school". Aisha's father attempted to explain that they were finding it difficult to work their way around a complicated schedule. Due to Nadja's language school and his own internship, both of which were compulsory, having to simultaneously bring two children to day-care at the other end of town early in the morning was a problem. He explained that it made more sense for them to bring the children to day-care a bit later. Alternatively, they would have to go there at seven in the morning, before he started his internship. However, the day-care workers saw this as an excuse and insisted, "This is the reality for many Danish families, not just for you. It is challenging to make ends meet".

Eventually, the kindergarten worked closely together with a wide range of other welfare practitioners who sought to help the family to establish more structured routines when it came to sleeping, eating, and playing habits. While the parents found some of this advice helpful, their sense of autonomy was clearly overruled, and they became increasingly depressed, oscillating between suppressed anger and resignation. The term "parental cooperation" is a taken-for-granted value in the Danish welfare state (Gulløv 2017; Matthiesen et al. 2021). Here, we clearly see that it disguises the unequal power relationship at stake in naturalizing the shared responsibility of parenting, thus turning differences and disagreements into an unwillingness to cooperate.

The interactions between Nadia and Ali and the various welfare professionals can perhaps be described as "intimately distant" in a similar fashion as the quasi-colonial interactions described by Bunkenborg et al. (2022). In spite of, or perhaps even accentuated by, the close proximity, the relationship could not in any meaningful way be described as "close" (Bunkenborg et al. 2022, p. 30). Rather, the couple attempted to move Aisha to another kindergarten, but when this failed, they suspected that the link between the head of the kindergarten and the municipality made this impossible. Over time, the empathy and mutual curiosity, which had initially characterized the relationship, became characterized by gaps in understanding and frustration. The case has much in common with a story described by Johansen and Jensen (2017), who have studied the interaction between Palestinian families in the "migrant ghetto" Gjellerup park and various social workers whose task it was to fight radicalization of certain youth. In one instance, they describe how a family "mimics the state" by "secretly" investigating the social worker who "secretly" investigates them by placing a microphone on a young boy, while a social worker visits their home to investigate and pry on their parenting practices. In the end, Johansen and Jensen (2017, p. 311) concluded:

> What comes of it is not much. Cecile (the social worker) can tick off the box on her form for the section 50 investigation: she conducted a conversation with the child, and the child has now 'been heard'. Faeq (the boy) can listen to the recorded conversation, but he probably gains little information about the requests, aims, or worries of the social worker.

These transgressive "states of intimacy", in both instances, seemed to result in an intensity of intimate distances and alienation.

7. Conclusions: Proximity as Intimate Distance

In recent years, the public discourse around refugees and migrants in Denmark, in particular in relation to parenting issues, revolve around the term "anxiety of proximity" (*berøringsangst*), which denotes a tendency to shy away from conflicts and cultural differences in particular in social housing areas that have been called "parallel societies". However, when examined from the perspective of refugee families, what may look like *berøringsangst* may in fact be an intrusion into the most intimate spheres of what makes up family life. In this article, I have explored the emotional ambiguity of refugee parents vis-à-vis the Danish welfare state, which looms large in family life. Refugees are both dependent on and feel anxious about their interaction with agents of the state. Trust may be dangerous, since it involves disclosing intimate family affairs. Failure to engage with the help coming from state agents is also risky and strongly discouraged. As a result, some states of intimacy become part of a vicious circle, creating anxiety and mistrust rather than closeness and understanding. For refugee families, it is difficult to see where the power of the state ends when it can be folded into the regulation of the most intimate daily family routines, such as sleeping, communication, and eating habits (see also Larsen 2022, this volume).

In each of the three family stories retold here in this article, we see that not only daycare workers and case workers, but also strangers or neighbors can sometimes suddenly be experienced as stand-ins for the state and that such negative interactions have deep social effects. Amira and Faisal's experience of a neighbor who complained about being disturbed by the sound of their baby crying at night led to them to be evicted from their apartment, and then later, the prospect of being homeless made a case worker threaten to place Rozerin in foster care. These instances are evocative of the perception of a spectral state, which is unpredictable and may suddenly appear in a ghost-like manner through neighbors who are not direct agents of the state. Finally, the man who reproached Sara in the supermarket and used the phrase, "In Denmark, we do not hit our children". Using such a "we" may come automatically to people for whom belonging to a national community is something taken for granted (Hage 1996). The "we" is noteworthy, as it clearly conveys a sense of a shared national identity to which people with an ethnic minority background do not belong.

Furthermore, by seeing social problems as first and foremost a question of cultural differences as entailed in the fear of "parallel societies", several problems emerge. First, cultural difference become a monolith, as if all refugee families have one shared culture, and at the same time, it obscures our human commonalities. Here, I am thinking of the universal need to have a say in one's own family life as a parent. Perhaps what is desirable for both refugee parents and agents of the welfare state is not absolute closeness, but rather "a kind of 'friendship' without intimacy and without closeness . . . , a regard for the person from the distance which the space of the world puts between us" (Arendt 1998, p. 243). Second, the hyper-precarious conditions for the everyday life of refugees (Shapiro 2022, p. 8) have, since the Paradigm Shift Law of 2019, whereby all residence permits were to be temporary, enhanced the fundamental sense of insecurity experienced by refugees, as they are under constant pressure to perform according to a widespread and ever-changing integration regime; however, this is evaded in the rhetoric of "berøringsangst". What sense does it make for the three families discussed in this article to raise children who are proficient in Danish and modelled on the Danish kinship norms if their future as a family potentially lies elsewhere? Their sense of belonging in Denmark is uncanny in the sense proposed by Heidegger ([1953] 2010), characterized by a fundamental inability to feel at home in the world and, thus, fundamentally uncertain or fueled by "angst". My fieldwork suggests that although the Danish state intervenes in the intimate sphere of the family, quite a few day-care workers or welfare practitioners really address this issue, and when doing so, it is fraught with a sense of powerlessness. This, nonetheless, defines everyday life for refugees in Denmark. It is often their one overriding concern, which frequently goes unnoticed and unaddressed. Yet, the spectral state is there, hovering in a ghostlike fashion, as refugee families attempt to establish everyday lives permeated by a lack of security and a sense of purpose. I have argued that to refugee parents, the state has a spectral quality, which is intimately connected with parenting: they seem acutely aware that in Denmark, children are not only their parents' children, but also, in some sense, children of the state.

Notes

[1] In order to protect the anonymity of my interlocutors, all names are pseudonyms.

[2] I have carried out interviews and participant observation in both English and Danish but also with the invaluable assistance of interpreters who have been able to translate from Kurdish into English and from Arabic into Danish.

[3] Her comment brought to mind Michael Jackson's reflections on the existential quandaries entailed in imagining states as parental figures. In an essay entitled "Imagining the Powers that Be", he asks, "One wonders whether the polis can *really* be founded on the values of the domus? Can a leader really be a father to the nation or citizens children of the state? Can a school teacher really act *in loci parentis*? Can psychologically distressed individuals ever feel safe and secure in state institutions? Can refugees reasonably expect hospitality in a country of asylum or have their cultural preferences and religious practices fully accepted? Can the motherland mother us?" (Jackson 2007, p. 45).

4   In *Centuries of Childhood*, Philip Ariès ([1960] 1996) found that a new understanding of the child emerged in Europe during the 17th century, when children became schooled into adulthood, and it was not something one automatically picked up: "It inflicted on him the birch, the prison cell—in a world, the punishments usually reserved for convicts from the lowest strata of society. But this severity was the expression of a very different feeling from the old indifference: an obsessive love was to dominate society from the 18th century on (ibid.). In other words, discipline and care went hand in hand, and from then on, children were no longer just their parents' children, but also children of the state" (p. 397).

5   Similarly, the previous year, her predecessor, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, in his 2017/2018 annual speech to the nation, announced that he was "deeply concerned" about the social housing areas of Denmark, where children grow up without learning the Danish language properly and are not afforded a fair chance of prospering. "We must take children out of the ghetto and into a Danish environment" he said. He was referring to Denmark's so called "ghetto legislations", which entail compulsory day-care for children in so-called "ghetto" areas from the time they turn one-year-old.

6   The idea of a preschool/daycare educational system stems from the pedagogical thinker Friedrich Fröbel, who, in 1840, created a "kindergarten" (literally children's garden) where children could be nurtured as new member of the society with the same tenderness as the gardener cares for sprouts in the garden (Bundgaard and Olwig 2018).

7   Bundgaard and Olwig (2018), for instance, argue that children from families with a minority background often pay a high price when they do not share the institutions' understanding of care and learning: "The childen's kinning in relation to their parents (. . .) is attributed positive values if the parents and the day-care institutions share the same ideas of proper child rearing and family relations, whereas their notions of relatedness may be called into question if their parents do not comply with, or share, the ideas and practices of child rearing promoted by the institutions" (cited in Bundgaard and Olwig 2018).

8   The head of the kindergarten came up with an innovative solution for the family. She proposed to the municipality that instead of the requirement that Nadia must leave her daughter alone in the daycare in order to take part in her obligatiory language classes, Nadia could instead stay in the kindergarten and practice her Danish language skills by talking to the day-care workers and children. She called this a "language internship", and for everyone involved, this turned out to be a win–win situation. Nadia smiled radiantly when she explained that although the language was difficult for her, being a teacher herself, she found that she could soon contribute. "Quite soon, I was doing everything", she said with a sense of pride. However, although this success story was admirable and conveys the possibilities for finding creative solutions and caring spaces, over time, the relationship between this family and the kindergarten became increasingly complicated and too close for comfort. For a more detailed acount of this relationship see (Bregnbæk 2019).

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