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Back in Time? A Temporal Autobiographical Approach to Afghan Return Migration

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ABSTRACT

Repatriation programmes for refugees and asylum seekers are based on the assumption that going 'home' is the most desirable thing to do to restore the social order that was disrupted by conflict. Yet the often-limited success of these programmes as migration management solutions, shown in poor reintegration results and re-emigration, shows that there is a need for a better understanding of the lived experiences of (return) migrants. This article studies Afghan managed and "spontaneous" return migrants from Europe through an innovative temporal autobiographical approach, using both verbal and creative participatory narrative methods. I find that some migration movements were experienced as disruptive, while others were not, and that return sometimes meant a return to a previous life, sometimes a continuation, and sometimes the start of something new. I conclude that migration management programmes aimed towards "durable solutions" and the wellbeing of returnees should *enable* rather than *constrain* post-return mobility.

INTRODUCTION

Repatriation programmes after conflict, initiated by receiving countries and international organizations, are based on the assumption by policy makers that sending refugees and asylum seekers back "home" is the most natural and desirable thing to do to restore the social order that was disrupted by conflict (Hammond, 1999; Chimni, 2000). Particularly after international military intervention, repatriating refugees is intended to demonstrate that stability was created and that the mission was successful (Blitz, Sales, and Marzano, 2005). This assumption implies that, when the initial reasons for migration have disappeared, return equals going back to pre-conflict and pre-migration life (Malkki, 1992).

Yet the often-limited success of these repatriation programmes as migration management solutions, shown in poor reintegration results and re-emigration (Schuster and Majidi, 2015), suggests that there is a need for a better understanding of the lived experiences of (return) migrants, in order to better respond to their needs. Many authors agree that rather than mere *re*turn and *re*integration, which imply reinstating what was disrupted by migration, any approach that is aimed at "durable solutions" and the wellbeing of return migrants should take into account that the post-conflict and post-return moment is a new phase in a dynamic and ongoing process, which may include renewed conflict and renewed mobility (see Van Houte, 2016).

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The case of Afghanistan is an example that shows the cyclical nature of migration flows, in which both continuity and disruption can be identified. Mobility in its various forms has been a fundamental coping and livelihood strategy for individuals and families throughout the history of Afghanistan and increasingly over the past four decades, shaping the social and economic fabric of the country (Monsutti, 2008). Since early times, migration within and across the borders of Afghanistan has been common for reasons of communication, trade, (seasonal) labour, state building and conflict, establishing ancient transnational networks (Ibid). The conflicts in Afghanistan of the last four decades have increased pre-existing migration flows and networks to an unprecedented scale (Oeppen, 2009). Responding to changing circumstances of violence, insecurity and livelihood opportunities, the nature of this conflict-related migration was constantly reshaped (Monsutti, 2008). An estimated ten million Afghans – one-third of the population – have been refugees at least once during this period (Koser, 2014), while it has been stated that more than half of the Afghan population has migrated at some point since the conflicts started (Oeppen, 2009). In the last four years, we have witnessed a new wave of Afghan outmigration alongside major deportation programmes from both Iran and Pakistan and countries further afield (Ruttig, 2015), as well as re-emigration of deported migrants (Schuster and Majidi, 2015).

These developments indicate that Afghan migration should be seen as recurrent multidirectional movements that change over time rather than a linear process (Monsutti, 2008). Return migration is therefore as much concerned with time as it is with space. Yet the temporal dimension of migration has analytically remained a relatively neglected issue (Cwerner, 2001). Although many studies on migration do take time into account, not only when they take a 'before', 'during' and 'after' perspective on migration but also in a recent spur of attention to 'temporality' in migration studies, the full breath of its potential remains underexplored.

In this article I explore the concept of time in addition to place as an analytical lens to better understand the lived experience of Afghan return migrants. I argue that a comprehensive focus on time includes how time is *present* in a migrant's life, how migrants *reflect* on time, how they *experience* time and how migrants can *decide* on their time. I draw on autobiographical research among Afghan return migrants who came back from European countries under a variety of circumstances: from being deported, to complying with Assisted 'Voluntary' Return, to voluntary return while having a legal alternative to stay. Rather than assuming the disruptive role of conflict-related migration on one hand and the 'natural' process of return on the other, this approach explores how the different periods of conflict and migration have different impacts on different returnees. This comprehensive focus on time provides both more depth and nuance to current insights on return migration.

In the remainder of this article, I will first discuss the literature on time in research on migration and develop an analytical framework. After a discussion of the autobiographical methods used for this study, in which I combined semi-unstructured interviewing with timeline drawing as a creative participatory approach to the autobiographical narrative, I will empirically show how the different dimensions of time gave insights into returnees' experience of migration and conflict. Concluding, I argue that any migration management programme aimed towards 'durable solutions' and the well-being of returnees should *enable* rather than *constrain* post-return mobility.

THE ROLE OF TIME IN RESEARCH ON (RETURN) MIGRATION

Different schools of research have come up with different approaches to time in migration. The most instrumental treatment of time takes place in explanatory studies on migration, which consider time in more or less objectively measurable independent variables that affect behaviour, such as the pace and duration of activities, circumstances and moments shaping migrants' individual

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characteristics (Cwerner, 2001; Collins and Shubin, 2015). For example, many studies look at the extent to which the duration of time spent in a certain place is associated with integration, transnational engagement or remittances, or (renewed) migration, and whether returnees can contribute to change upon return (Levitt and Rajaram, 2013).

In studies that specifically take a life course approach to migration, time is often divided into different stages of the migration cycle, which are associated with different legal, political and socio-economic status and shifting desires and capacities (Cwerner, 2001). Another approach is to look at which stages in life lead to which mobility decisions (Jeffery and Murison, 2011) and how age at the time of migration and length of stay affect choices of settlement and return (Erdal and Ezzati, 2015). This life-course approach offers the opportunity to analyse mobility patterns in relation to life stages and transitions (Collins and Shubin, 2015) and to obtain a standardized image of the role of time in people's lives. Yet its limitation is that it is based on linear understandings of time, in which we often inherently centralize migration as the key element of change in an individual's life.

The authors exploring broader theoretical understandings of time in migration argue that temporality should be understood as a relational rather than a static phenomenon (Collins and Shubin, 2015, 96). In autobiographical research, time is considered as a subjective tool that people use to *position* themselves and their families through interweaving different events and milestones of the past into the present (Pitt, 2015). The way people reflect on their life history shows how they manage, negotiate or reconcile internal inconsistencies, ambiguity and contradictions in order to create wholeness in their narratives, which becomes part of their 'personal myth'. Time is in this way an important site of analysis for understanding how identity is constructed (Nijhof, 2000; Buitelaar, 2006), how people make sense of their life in changing circumstances (Wong, 2014), and the role of migration in these processes of identity formation.

Autobiographical research also offers room for exploration of how people *experience* different times in their lives. Migration, although a change of spatial surroundings, may actually represent continuity in a person's experience or in that person's time allocation (Cwerner, 2001), for example when refugees can continue to access aspects of life that are no longer available in the place of origin, such as education, safety or employment (Shakhsari, 2014). In migration research, there is also increased interest in the idea that the transnational ties modern migrants maintain with their places of origin and destination, compel them to deal simultaneously with multiple cultural or institutional understandings of time (Cwerner, 2001; Maya-Jariego and Armitage, 2007). Others highlight experiences of migrants that seek belonging in realities that transcend time and space (Shoeb et al., 2007). Moreover, Collins and Shubin (2015) argue that past, present and future co-exist and are interrelated in migrants' experience of time, and they can simultaneously 'be' in the future, the past and the present. However, the risk in this type of research on the experience of time is that the empirical analysis remains abstract and subject to a large amount of interpretation.

Last, research on *agency* in migration is often considered as inherently time-related. In this context, agency can be defined as the self-perceived control individuals have over their decisions and actions, which simultaneously shape and are shaped by the political, economic, social and cultural structures in which they are embedded (Hitlin and Elder, 2007). For migrants, control over one's actions is often related to time, such as the length of stay, and the duration of asylum or immigration procedures. Especially in research on temporalities of refugees, such decisions in time are often perceived as measures of top-down power that are determined by legislation and law enforcement and lie beyond one's immediate control (Cwerner, 2001). This becomes apparent when states speed up or delay asylum procedures or when asylum seekers are assigned a 'temporary' or permanent status (Cwerner, 2004). These practices of "time politics" can put the present time on hold, in a temporary situation of asylum seekers or refugees (Abourahme, 2011), while insecurity about the future leads to experiences of suffering (El-Shaarawi, 2015) For undocumented and deportable migrants, a dual uncertainty of time that simultaneously threatens imminent change (deportation) and absent change (an ongoing state of undocumented life), creates instability and precarity

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(Griffiths, 2014). However, there is also criticism on this focus on the limited decision-making power of refugees, and an increased awareness that, even when constrained and "managed", migrants and refugees do have opportunities to direct their mobility (Mainwaring, 2016; Collins, 2018). Moreover, this migration decision-making cannot be understood as generated in a singular moment but should be understood in the context of past, present and future desires and conditions (Collins, 2018). There is a need for a more open approach to understand migrants' and refugees' temporal decision-making power.

An analytical framework of time

Analytically deconstructing time and centralizing time rather than mobility as the main unit of analysis can help in understanding the lived experience of migrants, which include, but are not limited to, experiences of migration and conflict. Although I do not attempt to develop a typology of time, we can classify the approaches to research on time in migration described above into four analytical dimensions of social processes. These dimensions are inspired by the ORID model, which was originally developed and is widely applied as a model for focused conversation (Stanfield, 2000): Observation, Reflection, Interpretation, and Decision. *Observation* of time is about how time is present in the lives of migrants in the interplay between ruptures and continuities, old rhythms and new routines. *Reflection* is on how migrants emotionally reflect on time. The *interpretation* of time studies how people experience time. Studying these reflections on and experiences of time can tell us about how people position themselves in the world (Nijhof, 2000; Buitelaar, 2006). A last dimension on *decisions* or control over time is central to questions of power and agency (Griffiths, 2014). These dimensions will form the analytical framework of this article.

METHODS: A TEMPORAL AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

This article is based on a study conducted by the author in the Afghan capital Kabul between May and July 2012 during two field visits of one month each. The analysis for this article is based on individual meetings with 35 voluntary and involuntary returnees who participated in the study, notably from the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Germany and Scandinavia. The majority of returnees were male, reflecting a demographic reality that migratory movements are gender selective: Involuntary returnees were often men who had migrated alone and had returned alone before they had been able to bring their families to join them (Schuster and Majidi, 2013). Female voluntary returnees were also a minority, which is consistent with observations that female migrants from developing countries are more reluctant to return to a country with greater gender inequality compared to the host country (Guarnizo, 1997). This reality, however, puts a strong male bias on the perspectives of the returnees that are presented.

I attempted to have at least two meetings with each participant. Some interviews were conducted directly with the researcher in Dutch or English. Others were done with the help of a translator. The texts were analysed with the help of the Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software programme Atlas.ti. Returnees were contacted through as many entry points as possible: first, based on a list of the participants of earlier research (Van Houte and Davids, 2008), second, through networking via several entrance points in Kabul and third, through snowball sampling, which is a useful technique for locating participants when the subject of the research is sensitive and the population is hidden (Bloch, 2008).

In the individual meetings, I chose an autobiographical narrative approach to give room to returnees' experiences of time. Conceiving the migration experience as a form of narrative 'helps transcend the traditional, dichotomous view of the journey as having a beginning and end or an origin

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and final destination' (Kaytaz, 2016, 2). I used a combination of verbal and creative participatory narrative methods. First, I asked participants to tell their life history, from the moment they were born to where they were now. I emphasized that they could take as much time as they liked and that anything they said would be good, as long as it was their own experience. I explained that I would not ask many questions, only clarification questions. With this open question, participants took between 15 minutes and several hours to explain their initial life history.

After the verbal life history had come to a natural end by arriving in the present, I asked participants to draw a little summary of that full story in a graphic timeline, which served as a minimally structured, accessible, creative and participatory method of graphic elicitation (Sheridan, Chamberlain, and Dupuis, 2011). The horizontal axis represented their life from birth to present, and the vertical axis the evaluation of that life, from positive to negative. The exercise took place in two steps: the actual drawing, and the participatory analysis of that drawing. Although the drawing itself produced brief information in its own right (Pain and Francis, 2003), the participatory analysis became a vehicle for new reflections and interpretations on the course of my participants' lives (Sheridan, Chamberlain, and Dupuis, 2011).

Like any autobiographical method, the life history telling and timeline drawing should be seen as subjectively produced in a relational context between the narrator, the audience and the surroundings. Stories can change over time as new situations, life experiences and audiences are encountered (Sheridan, Chamberlain and Dupuis, 2011). The narrative and timeline should therefore not be seen as an objective tool to retrieve chronological facts, but as a way to obtain insights in the meaning and order given to events in time by the participants (Nijhof, 2000; Wood and Groger, 2000).

The autobiographical narrative and the timeline together reinforced the analytical opportunities of a temporal approach to migration while making up for its challenges. First, while the semi-unstructured type of interview allowed participants to impose their own framework of understanding to their experiences, jumping back and forth in time and space and highlighting certain moments while leaving gaps elsewhere, the timeline helped to still obtain a sense of chronology in participants' experiences (Pain and Francis, 2003; Bagnoli, 2009; Patterson, Markey, and Somers, 2012). Second, rather than leaving the interpretation of the autobiographical narrative to the researcher, the timeline was used to explore together with the participant the meaning and dimensions of their memories and stories (Sheridan, Chamberlain and Dupuis, 2011), which revealed nuance and complexities of migration decisions (Gauntlett, 2007, in Bagnoli, 2009). Lastly, the timeline accommodated the needs of different participants, who engaged with the semi-unstructured interview technique differently. Some participants communicated their life stories with ease. These participants tended to be better educated, and/or to see their migration stories as success stories. Interviews with these participants were typically longer and more detailed, as participants took the freedom to tell their life story in their own words without being probed by additional questions. In contrast, other participants found it harder to put their experiences to words and seemed uncomfortable with being interviewed. These participants typically did not enjoy the socio-economic privileges of the first group and/or had more negative migration stories. Instead of increasing the pressure by asking additional probing questions, I introduced the timeline exercise as an easy and structured yet empowering exercise that released the tension of being interviewed. Although it may seem like a difficult task to summarize a lifetime into a clear 'graph', the exercise was presented as a summary of the narrative they had just told, and most participants were capable of and enjoyed drawing such a timeline. The participatory timeline exercise therefore had added value for all participants: those who were previously brief and tense about telling their life story now relaxed and were encouraged to provide more details on elements that they found important to their story, while participants who had already elaborately explained their story were now encouraged to add focus to that narrative.

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Last, with this methodology I attempted to address some of the ethical issues that arise when doing research among vulnerable people and return migrants in particular. For some migrants, telling their life story had a negative connotation related to extensive interrogations during the asylum procedure, especially if their narrative had not led to a positive asylum decision (Eastmond, 2007). Many of these returnees were reluctant and sometimes cynical about telling their story. In addition to creating a safe and open interview environment as I described above, the drawing of the timeline helped to break the ice, build trust and inspire the conversation. The other side of this vulnerability is that researchers of migration are likely to become incorporated into migrants' survival strategies (Jacobsen and Landau, 2003). In this study, some returnees seemed to see the researcher as a representative of their former host country's authorities. They were therefore either reluctant to share confidential information, or overemphasized their unfortunate situation, which risked to compromise the research findings. Much effort was therefore put into highlighting the confidential treatment of the information the participants provided and to make clear that while the participants' participation in the study could possibly influence future policies on migration, it would not affect their personal situation either positively or negatively.

RESULTS

Elsewhere, I have described how the Afghan return migrants in this study returned as a result of a complex decision-making process, and that rather than their repatriation signifying the end of their journey, mobility continues to be an essential desire in the lives of return migrants. Socio-economic differences that existed prior to migration are reinforced by the migration experience, which results in strongly differentiated patterns of post-return embeddedness and transnational mobility (see for example Van Houte, 2016). The verbal and creative approaches to the autobiographical narratives presented here complement these findings by producing more fine-grained insights into the experiences, attitudes and emotions of the participants in relation to their migration story. Below, I will discuss three of those narratives and accompanying timelines to highlight some of the patterns that could be observed across the wider sample.

Observation: The presence of conflict and mobility in time

When drawing their timelines, participants marked the key events, periods and turning points that they considered as significantly present in their lives, albeit in different ways. The first example I have named Ajmal (to protect the privacy of the participants in this study, all names are pseudonyms). Ajmal's asylum application was rejected and he was obliged to return after the fall of the Taliban, after which he eventually complied with Assisted Voluntary Return. He produced the drawing displayed in Figure 1.

As he was drawing, he explained it as follows:

> I don't remember my [earliest] childhood, but I can say that from 5 to 17, it was a very good life. And after that, the Mujahedeen came and the war started and they just mixed up everything. We have an expression that they mixed up everything with dust, that was the bad time. And [...] this is the Taliban came. When Taliban came it was bad again. Although I was not here the whole time when Taliban was here, but maybe one or two years. And this was the time that I went to Holland. And in Holland it was really good time. I didn't have any problems. But when I came back, this is the happiest life. I have no problems. Now.
>
> Ajmal (m, interview, original in Dari, via translator)

In Ajmal's narrative, we see a personal life history intertwined with different stages of the Afghan conflict. He draws a positive image of his childhood, followed by a negative period

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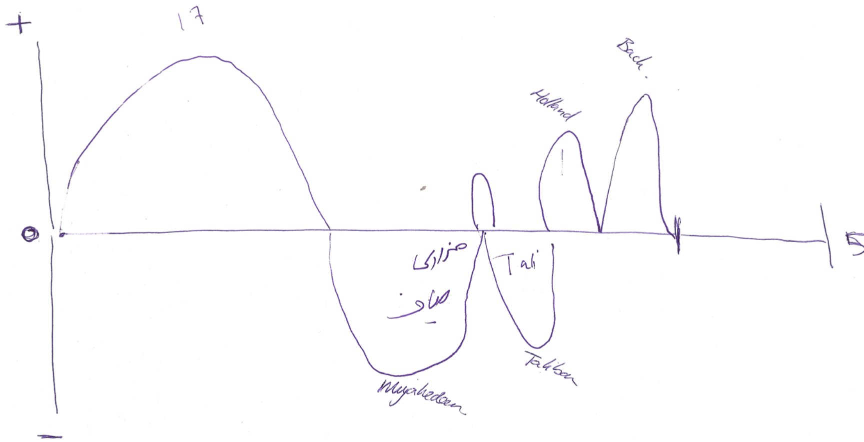
FIGURE 1
TIMELINE DRAWING OF AJMAL



Note: The horizontal axis represents life from birth to present; the vertical axis the evaluation of that life from positive to negative.

characterized by conflict in which the family lost their livelihood. The short positive change that follows is related to his move to the city centre of Kabul where he managed to start a shop, immediately followed by a negative period when the Taliban came to power in the city and closed his business. He then marks his move to the Netherlands as a positive changing point, although in his narrative he describes it as 'boring' as he was forced to wait in a reception centre for asylum seekers without being able to work. He then describes his return to Afghanistan as a positive change in which he is able to see his family again, gets married and manages to restart his business, together with his brothers.

While many positive or negative episodes and changing points in Ajmal's life relate to episodes of migration and conflict, other migration and conflict episodes are not highlighted as significant. Elsewhere in the interview, Ajmal mentions on a side note that there already were shootings and rockets landing in the place where he lived during his childhood. Nevertheless, he describes the period of his childhood as very happy, which he ascribes to the fact that he did not have the responsibility within his family to keep everyone safe. Later in the interview, it becomes clear that this reference to no responsibility in the past is related to the burden of responsibility he feels in the present, having a family of his own. In a similar vein, some episodes of migration are less present in his narrative and timeline than others: He explains that he was in Afghanistan for about two years during the Taliban and was 'away' the rest of the time, meaning that he moved to Pakistan during that time, but this migration experience is in no way highlighted on the timeline. Whether he was in Afghanistan or Pakistan, the Taliban era seemed to be an equally negative experience to him, which shows the unsafe and difficult living conditions for Afghan refugees in Pakistan at the time.

The next example, shown in Figure 2, is of Salim, who had acquired refugee status and later citizenship of the Netherlands, but at some point chose to return.

While drawing, he explained:

> I think the first was, yeah, positive really. Yeah five, you're a kid aren't you, while there was already war really. Does it have to go this way, or I think it is going this way, and then you arrive here in Kabul, and then it is something, normal, neutral, really positive, yeah on the positive side I

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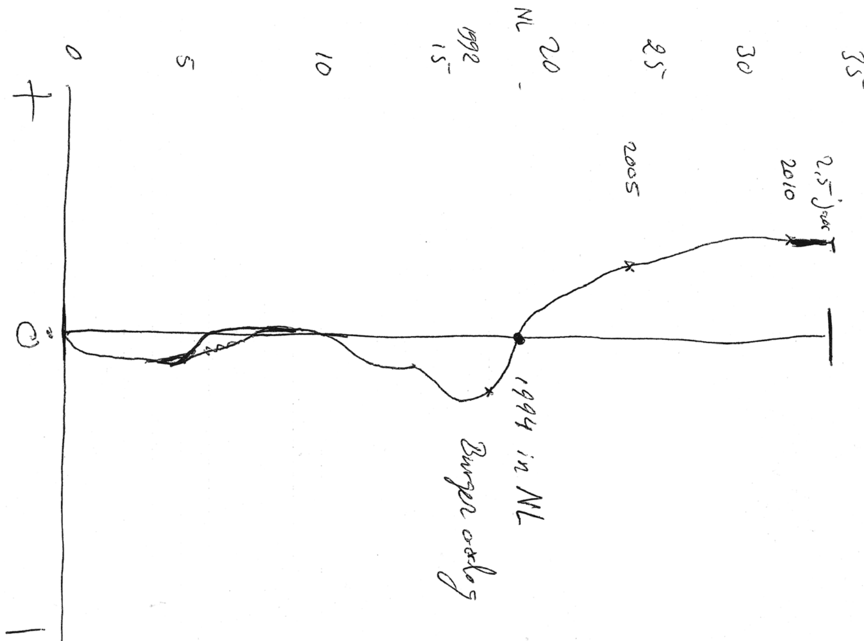
FIGURE 2
TIMELINE DRAWING OF SALIM



Note: The horizontal axis represents life from birth to present; the vertical axis the evaluation of that life from positive to negative.

> can say. And then it goes back to that side because, eh, goes to negative, ehm. Yes. And then you're about here and then ehm then come the, then it is 1992, about here, and then it gets worse, and then you come to the Netherlands, then it only goes positive. I think it's just such a line.
>
> Salim (m, interview, original in Dutch)

Salim, too, describes some migration and conflict episodes as significant or disruptive moments in his life, while others are not mentioned. Moreover, his hesitations while drawing show that the significance of these events is not always as evident as one might think. His timeline shows a different pattern of important conflict and migration episodes from that of Ajmal. Although he initially describes his childhood in the provinces of Afghanistan as positive, he draws a negative line and describes elsewhere in the interview how he used to be very scared in that period of civil war. A move from the provinces to the capital city is a changing point back to neutral or slightly positive. This changes back to negative when the civil war also reaches Kabul. In 1994, when the Taliban starts emerging, he moves to the Netherlands. This move marks the beginning of a continuing upward line. Although Salim describes a return migration move between the Netherlands and Afghanistan in 2005, followed by a move back to the Netherlands, and again back to Afghanistan in 2010, he does not mark them as changing points on his time line.

Rather than there being an inherent disruptive role of migration and conflict, Ajmal's and Salim's narratives and timelines show that different episodes of migration, return and conflict can be of different, and sometimes ambivalent significance to returnees. In addition, some of the narratives suggested that migration experiences were marked as significant because they coincided with other life-changing moments rather than being inherently meaningful, which comes to the fore in the

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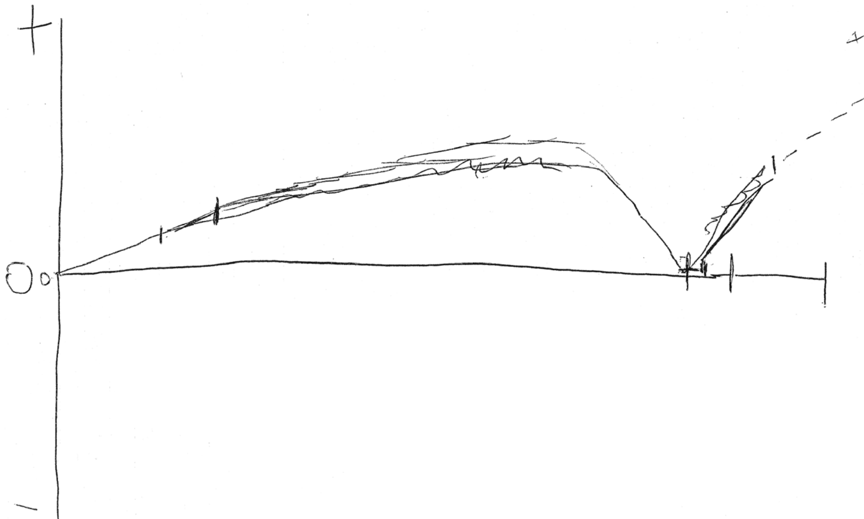
narrative of Eshan. Eshan is a returnee from Germany who had come along with his parents to Germany as a young child. He had obtained German nationality and never really engaged with the Afghan community there. Yet after his studies, he said he felt increasingly bored with life in Germany and became interested in exploring his Afghan identity. Like many young returning Afghans, he initially returned to work for an international company and lived in a community of expatriates, before he decided to start his own company and try to engage more with local life. He started by drawing the timeline represented in Figure 3.

Eshan initially drew a linear and steep line upward immediately after his return. When I asked him to explain this increase since his arrival in Afghanistan, he wanted to adjust it, in order to show what he meant. The new line represented his return experience in two phases: a moderately positive to neutral one immediately after return, and a stronger positive line after that.

> Let's make it like this, sorry, OK? (makes first part after return flatter). Let's make it like this. That was the period in the guesthouse, nothing changed, I was there with Afghan Germans, with foreigners, and all my life like here partying all the time, not thinking about Afghanistan. And it was still the same and then I stopped it because wait a minute, nothing has changed, my wrong decision to come back to Afghanistan, because we're doing nothing and just partying, making money, that's it. And then I started to think over and started this company because I was not happy because of the cultural thing. And that was also kind of learning process about Afghanistan and about everything else, about myself, wanted to do this, because I thought man if you continue like this, it's nothing else than here, then why are you here now in Germany, eh Afghanistan for, for what. And then I changed it, I left the company, and tried to do myself.
>
> Eshan (m, interview, original in English)

Although the main changing point on Eshan's timeline does coincide with a return migration episode, it became clear in the narrative that changing his lifestyle, moving away from the expat community, trying to live the life of "local" Afghans and finding a sense of belonging there was to him

FIGURE 3
TIMELINE DRAWING OF ESHAN



Note: The horizontal axis represents life from birth to present; the vertical axis the evaluation of that life from positive to negative.

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a stronger turning point than the physical return. This is an example of a general observation that a migration episode was mainly marked as a life-changing moment if it coincided with transformative life experiences, such as growing up and coming of age, identity-seeking, marriage, child bearing, and career development, which are more common life history themes. Despite it being the result of a failed asylum application, Ajmal marked his return as positive because he started a family and was able to restart his business. By contrast, as Salim's return moves represented a continuation of the career and lifestyle that he started in the Netherlands, he did not consider them as important turning points.

Concluding this section, observing the place of narrated events on the participants' timeline, and the positive and negative periods and turning points in them, strongly nuanced both the implicit assumption of conflict related migration as an inherently disruptive experience and the logic of return as restoring of the "natural" order (Davis, Kuipers, and Lutz, 1995; Findlay and Li, 1997; see also Nijhof, 2000). First, not all conflict and migration episodes were considered a key disruptive moment: Sometimes, migration (and return) meant continuity while sometimes it was *immobility* that was considered disruptive. Second, a distinction can be made between mobility as inherently disruptive, or mobility as instrumental to transformations or ruptures on other transformative elements of life, such as a family life or career (see also Kaytaz, 2016). The next phases of the participatory analysis helped to make sense of these patterns.

Reflection and interpretation: Relating to time

In addition to the mere presence of important events and moments on participants' timelines, the way in which narratives were told and timelines were drawn also provided information about how people emotionally reflected on and experienced time and events. Although these two dimensions could be studied separately, they will here be analysed together as how people *relate* to time. This brought forward insightful nuance and complexities that helped to explain seeming contradictions or discrepancies in the narratives, for example on motivations to return (Gauntlett, 2007, in Bagnoli, 2009).

From the narrative of Ajmal, for example, we learn that although due to the fall of the Taliban regime his asylum claim in the Netherlands was rejected, it did not take away his security concerns upon return. He would have preferred to stay in the Netherlands, but did not have the legal possibility to do so. Ajmal explained that he found it too hard to live there without access to a legal status, work, housing, or a family life. He also feels he wasted five years of his time waiting for a decision about his asylum case, only to be finally rejected. Weighing all options, he decided to comply with an Assisted Voluntary Return programme. Upon return, he is happy that he could rebuild his life as a businessperson, from which he gains respect and self-confidence. When asked how he feels about his return, he reflected on this as follows:

> I am happy for my life, I love my country, I love my Afghanistan, my kids I am here. But in case if there is any problem in the future, we don't know the future, what will happen. If there's something the Holland government could do something to help us. Just ideas.
>
> Ajmal

Ajmal's reflections on his past, present and future provides a nuanced insight into his motivations for return. His reflections show the complexity of migration decisions in the context of conflict: The impossibility of building up a socio-economically stable life in the Netherlands made him decide to return, and his current success in his work and with his family gave him a sense of content. This does not undo the fact that escaping the Taliban regime had been his main reason to leave and although they were at present not a threat to him, the looming possibility of the Taliban regaining power in the future made him feel vulnerable and wanting to find a possibility to leave

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again. Ajmal returned for a better chance to build up his socio-economic life, despite the security risk, but he also wants to try to leave again, despite the economic risk he would again take. This example illustrates that migrants from conflict areas are driven by a set of interlinked political, security, economic or social motives that are dynamic, can exist simultaneously, and cannot easily fit into binary categorizations of either "voluntary" or "forced", and "economic" or "humanitarian" mobility.

The reflective dimension also showed that the move to one's country of birth was not always considered as "return". For example, I asked Eshan to reflect on his timeline, which showed a line that was at present back on the same level of happiness as before his "down" period in Germany. Yet when I asked whether he was now as happy as he had been in Germany, he said:

> I don't think it's both as one picture. I suggest it's a next part, it's a next, and I'm not comparing it with my life in Germany, I was very happy in Germany, fantastic, but I couldn't improve myself anymore. It was kind of a dead point. Ehm to grow more as I wanted to be as a person as a human being.
>
> Eshan

Eshan makes clear that his German time and his Afghan time, with a period of transition in the expat community in-between, were to him steps in his personal development. As the fragment in the previous section shows, coming to Afghanistan eventually meant a move forward into a completely different and largely unfamiliar lifestyle, and finding the sense of Afghanness that he never had, rather than a return.

Last, participatory interpretations of their timelines also gave some insights in participants' experiences and attitudes, which are normally hard to grasp. Some participants who looked back at their timeline commented on the patterns they started to see. When asked, what he thought of his timeline, Salim commented:

> I never saw my life like this. I know what I have been through of course but when you put it on paper you think OK, there is a lot on the negative side, and I am an optimist so actually it could have been like this [much more negative]. Yeah so I don't know, I'm not going to complain. I think people who just complain they... You see, if there is a bit of positive, I will pull it to the positive. Because I appreciate the small positive things too. Because you didn't have that so you appreciate it a lot.
>
> Salim

Salim's optimistic, energetic tone is a good example of the attitudes that were common among Afghans who had returned without being legally obliged to do so. On the other hand, Ajmal commented on the same question:

> It makes me go and think about the past. But I'm not gonna think about the past. Because whatever passed it passed. You cannot stop it, you cannot bring any change, you cannot just, you can do one thing, to get experience from that. (...). An Afghan expression says that 'when the water is gone, you shouldn't take the shovel and go for it'. It's already gone, it's just a waste of time. Think about the water that is still here.
>
> Ajmal

Ajmal's words show both resilience and determination to not linger in the past and regret and resignation about how his life had unfolded. These examples show that time proved to be a stratifying force: while some returnees felt that they were growing through time, others experienced a sense of stagnation or decline when interpreting their timeline.

Concluding this section, reflecting on and interpreting time together with participants captured hard- to-measure issues such as desires, decisions, attitudes and experiences of migration, which

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were more nuanced and complex than common assumptions about return migration. These reflections, which show how complex migration decisions can be, that the move to one's country of birth was not always considered as "return" or even as "migration" but may rather be a new step in life or career, gives more depth to the earlier observation that geographical relocation is not always the primary disruptive element in people's life-changing experiences.

Decision: Agency and time

The last dimension of self-perceived decision-making power or control over one's actions in time can be considered a crucial survival skill or asset, especially in a highly unstable environment, which provides a strong general indicator for how people were doing after return. The clearest illustrations of this came in the final phase of the interview, when I asked participants to reflect on the future: whether they expected their life and the situation in Afghanistan to improve, and what they imagined they should do to make that happen. My participants' narratives showed clear patterns of differentiation. Salim said:

> I expect that a lot is going to change. I expect positive change. Ehm cause yeah, we will exchange soldiers for entrepreneurs, and that is always good. (...) Yes and who knows perhaps it will go bad and then I'll go back to the Netherlands and then I will just. Settle.
>
> Salim

Salim's narrative shows that he is optimistic about the future, both for himself and for Afghanistan. By using the word "we", Salim indicates that he considers himself as a contributor of the positive change he expects for Afghanistan. While he also recognizes the unpredictable nature of the situation in Afghanistan, he is confident that he will be able to remain in control over his own actions within the circumstances, if need be by leaving the country. His Dutch passport is the most important facilitator of his mobility. In contrast to Salim's story, Ajmal is a lot less confident:

> Well I'm really trying my best to be positive. I'm just praying to God to put everyone in a positive level. Not only me, all the people in Afghanistan. But this is something that you cannot tell.
>
> Ajmal

Earlier in our conversations, Ajmal had said:

> it's [the] third time, in my life, I am doing my business from the basic, from the very low, and I'm growing, and I hope this was the last time. To not fall down again in my life.
>
> Ajmal

Although Ajmal, like Salim, wants to be optimistic, and has shown a tremendous amount of resilience in the course of his life, he indicates that the future is not in his hands. Rather than seeing himself an active contributor to the future of Afghanistan and being in control of his own actions, he feels that all he can do is pray, without being confident that this will help.

These reflections on both the future for Afghanistan and participants' own role in it, proved to be an insightful indicator of agency, or the extent to which participants felt capable of imagining different scenarios and coming up with strategies to adapt or respond to new developments (Davis, Kuipers, and Lutz, 1995; Buitelaar, 2006). The example of Salim who is comfortable with speculating on a future of opportunities and a stronger sense of control over his own options, is typical for the pro-active attitude that was generally found among voluntary returnees who were not legally forced to return. It can be seen as both as a reflection of the more privileged backgrounds of most voluntary returnees, who had more home-grown 'capacity to aspire', but also as a result of a successful migration experience, where aspirations and hope

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had been rewarded and nurtured. In contrast, involuntary returnees like Ajmal were typically of more modest background and were, due to their failed migration experience that allowed them no legal alternative but to return, were more disappointed in the past and felt, not least because of their decreased financial and legal possibilities for out-migration, more vulnerable about their prospects for the future (See also Van Houte, Siegel and Davids, 2015). At the same time, while the analysis shows a watershed of difference in attitudes between voluntary and involuntary returnees, Ajmal's narrative is an example of the tremendous resilience that many involuntary returnees also portrayed in yet again building up a life within the constraints of the situation they find themselves in.

Concluding this section, participants' hopes, expectations and attitudes towards the future were an insightful indicator of the amount of agency to imagine different scenarios and coming up with their own responses to them. Looking into perceived agency over time reinforced and gave depth to earlier findings that legal status has a stratifying effect on the return experience: While those with a foreign passport saw an escape route, those without felt increasingly stuck in Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have explored Afghan managed and "spontaneous" return migrants from Europe through an innovative temporal autobiographical approach. This approach offers an additional analytical lens for a nuanced study of migration and return as a continuous process in time, in addition to physical movements between places. The more nuanced and fine-grained understandings of returnees' lived experiences this produces may help to improve repatriation programmes for refugees and asylum seekers.

Observing the place of narrated events on the participants' timeline, helps to overcome the implicit assumption and overgeneralized notions of migration and conflict as an inherently disruptive experience, and the implicit assumption that this disruption is restored with return. Participants' observations of their time show that some migration movements were experienced as disruptive, while others were not, and that return sometimes meant a return to a previous life, sometimes a continuation, and sometimes the start of something new. *Reflections* on and *interpretations* of the timelines captured complexities such as desires, decisions and attitudes of mobility, which allowed the questioning of common assumptions of return migration as movements that can be either voluntary or forced. Different experiences of migration and return could be both empowering and disempowering. Last, participants' perceived *decision-making* power for the future was an insightful indicator of agency experienced by the returnees. These findings reiterate that for returnees, the post-return moment is not a natural end stage of a migration journey, but rather a point in time that will be followed by future moments in which mobility may again be a coping and livelihood strategy. Since the fieldwork in 2012, the renewed violence and outflows of Afghans, who take increasingly dangerous journeys as almost all legal routes to migrate are blocked, has painfully shown this reality. This shows the importance of post-return mobility, defined not so much as the *act* of moving, but rather as the *possibility* of doing so, in the experience of return.

Drawing on life histories and timelines collected from Afghan return migrants from Europe, I have argued that a temporal autobiographical approach offers more fine-grained insights into the experiences, attitudes and emotions of the participants in relation to their migration story, which are difficult to capture through observations or interviews, when people are cautious about what they want to say or show (Sheridan, Chamberlain and Dupuis, 2011). These insights help us to understand the essential desire for mobility of return migrants, including those who are forcibly

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deported or coerced into Assisted Voluntary Return, and may help us to respond better to their needs. Based on the results of this analysis, I argue that any migration management programme aimed towards "durable solutions" and the wellbeing of returnees should foster their remarkable resilience by *enabling* rather than *constraining* post-return mobility.

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