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Circles of alienation: examining first-hand experiences of citizenship deprivation through the perspective of emotions and estrangement

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ABSTRACT

Many states have recently re-discovered citizenship deprivation as a tool to exclude undesirable citizens. Scholars have primarily discussed the implications of this policy (re)turn from perspective of the state and the migrant communities targeted, while leaving embodied experiences of denaturalisation unexamined. This article draws on a unique interview material with 28 individuals in a hard-to-reach group: people facing citizenship deprivation and statelessness or deportation from Norway. In 2015–2016, the Norwegian government stepped up efforts to uncover and sanction cases of naturalisation fraud. Legal reinforcement was coupled with government rhetoric that spread fear and insecurity in the targeted populations. As such, it is exemplary of affective governance. Inspired by Ahmed's economic and relational perspective on emotions, this article asks: what emotions circulate and stick in the affective economy of denaturalisation? How do these emotions shape individual bodies, families and communities exposed to denaturalisation? Exposure to denaturalisation gave shape to three constellations of emotions and estrangement: (i) pain, anger, and alienation from the national body, (ii) fear and destabilisation of families and communities, and (iii) exhaustion and self-estrangement. Undergoing the process of citizenship deprivation is therefore not only a deeply unsettling, embodied experience but also a process that reshapes social relations.

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Introduction

The revival of citizenship deprivation is now a well-documented fact. In attempts to mitigate the risks of 'home-grown terrorism' and protect citizenship from 'bogus asylum seekers', many states across Europe and North-America have introduced, amended or re-invigorated dormant laws to facilitate the stripping of citizenship (Birnie and Bauböck 2020; Fargues 2019). Scholarship on contemporary practices have largely focused on the legal, democratic, normative, and symbolic implications of this policy

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(re)turn (e.g. Fargues and Winter 2019; Gibney 2020; Joppke 2016; Lenard 2018; Macklin 2014; Tripkovic 2021; Winter and Previsic 2019) as well as its disproportional effects on migrant communities (Kapoor 2018; Naqvi 2022). Yet one perspective has been left untouched by this flourishing literature: *first-hand, embodied experiences* of those targeted. Given the personal stakes of denaturalisation – permanent withdrawal of rights and statelessness or deportation – this neglect is remarkable.

This article seeks to address this research gap by exploring the life-worlds of naturalised Norwegian citizens facing citizenship deprivation. At the height of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015–2016, the Norwegian right-wing government (consisting of the Conservative Party and the Progress Party) instructed the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) to re-examine suspicious applications for citizenship granted in the past. A special task force within UDI was established to process revocation cases. At the end of 2016, UDI had opened 500 cases, a number that was doubled by 2022 (Jensen 2022). Members of government also addressed potential targets of citizenship revocation directly through the media. In an op-ed in a national newspaper, a representative from the Progress Party (Helge André Njåstad) wrote: ‘The Progress Party will never reward cheaters with Norwegian citizenship. Our message is simple; if you have lied your way to residency, you should never relax. You should know that you can be exposed and deported at any time’ (Njåstad 2017).

The statement is emblematic of a broader trend of regulating inclusion and exclusion by appealing to affect and emotion (Ayata 2019). It displays how the attribution of emotions, such as suspicion, fear and insecurity, are central in how citizens are made alien (Beauchamps 2018; Franz 2015). In this article, I draw on a unique interview material with 28 individuals facing such state suspicion. The interview material is analysed through Sara Ahmed’s (2004, 2010, 2014) work on emotions, community formation, and estrangement. According to Ahmed’s economic and relational model, emotions circulate between bodies and signs. In this perspective, emotions are personal and social at the same time. Moreover, emotions are ‘unequally distributed’ (Bargetz 2015) – fear, for instance, ‘sticks’ to certain bodies more than others. The statement by the government representative works by aligning a national ‘we’ against a common threat (cf. Ahmed 2004): liars and cheaters. Following this logic, ‘citizenship cheaters’ are unworthy of rights and should be expelled from the national community. However, at the time of conducting the interviews, the outcome was in most cases not determined. The interviewees found themselves in a lengthy, bureaucratic process of denaturalisation, which had yet to reach a conclusion. Their ambiguous legal position makes it worth asking: *what emotions circulate and stick in the affective economy of denaturalisation? How do these emotions shape individual bodies, families and communities exposed to denaturalisation?*

Reading the interview material through Ahmed’s economic and relational understanding of emotions, I examine how different emotions were embodied and expressed, and how they shaped actions and relations to collective bodies. The analysis highlights three findings. First, some of the interviewees expressed *pain and anger* in being *alienated* from the national body. Through pain and anger, they critiqued the state’s denaturalisation policies for excluding ethnic minorities and ‘non-whites’ from the national community. Secondly, I found that *fears* of deportation and government surveillance circulated, which *destabilised families* and targeted *communities*, especially the Somali community in

Norway. These fears restricted their lives, making some consider self-deportation. Finally, many interviewees expressed *exhaustion* as they found themselves in a protracted bureaucratic process, with no immediate end in sight. This exhaustion was coupled with a sense of *self-estrangement*, feeling at odds with their very place in the world. As such, exposure to citizenship deprivation led to alienation in three concentric circles of life: they became increasingly estranged from the nation, their families and communities and themselves.

The article unfolds in six sections. First, I describe the legal and political backdrop of the intensified denaturalisation efforts by the Norwegian government. Secondly, I situate the revival of citizenship deprivation within a broader framework of affective governance. In the third section, I present the data material as well as methodological reflections and challenges connected to understanding the circulation of emotions in qualitative interviews. The fourth section situates the interviewees within the administrative process of citizenship revocation and highlights some of the legal challenges they faced. The fifth section outlines the findings in three parts. In the final section, I conclude by comparing the legal and emotional precarity of denaturalisation targets to other disadvantaged groups in the migration-citizenship nexus.

Naturalisation fraud in Norway: law, politics, and process

The politicisation of naturalisation fraud

Most countries have a provision in their citizenship legislation that regulates fraud (Birnie and Bauböck 2020). Compared to citizenship deprivation on grounds of terrorism, fraud-based denaturalisation has garnered little public as well as academic attention (Fargues 2019). In Norway, the fraud-provision was unanimously passed by Parliament in 2005 as part of a larger revision of the citizenship law. The Norwegian Nationality Act (NNA) stipulates that citizenship can be revoked if it is granted on incorrect or incomplete information, provided that the applicant has furnished the incorrect information against their better judgment or has suppressed circumstances of substantial importance for the decision (26(2)). At the time of its institution, this provision was considered a dry, legal technicality. During the 2015–2016 ‘refugee crisis’, however, naturalisation fraud became the centre of public attention. The government then instructed UDI to prioritise cases of fraud. This was one of several policy measures in which the government instituted to curb the number of incoming asylum seekers arriving in Norway. When these numbers of asylum seekers successfully decreased, however, UDI was left with excessive resources which were then allocated to revocation cases. A special unit within UDI was now dedicated to uncovering cases of naturalisation fraud (Brekke, Birkvad, and Erdal 2020).

As the number of investigated cases grew (500 at the end of 2016), the newspapers caught on to the practice. Most cases included immigrants of Somali descent who were accused of concealing their identity or country of origin. The case of Mahad Abib Mahamud received wide media coverage. Mahamud was deprived of Norwegian citizenship after 15 years in Norway. The authorities suspected him of originating from Djibouti, not Somalia, which he had originally claimed when he applied for asylum. Ethnic Palestinians were the second largest immigrant group targeted by

revocation. In these cases, the immigration authorities had allegedly uncovered that persons who have claimed protection in Norway on grounds of being stateless had access to Jordanian citizenship. The media highlighted a case of a Palestinian family of three generations, who were collectively targeted by citizenship deprivation, two decades after arriving in Norway. Based on these mediated stories, parties on the centre-left submitted legislative proposals to reduce the executive's authority and to strengthen the position of those accused of naturalisation fraud. Most importantly, the Socialist Party, the Green Party, and the Red Party proposed to prohibit the state from opening revocation cases after a certain number of years after naturalisation (a 'statute of limitations') and to shield children from revocation. A broad coalition including the Socialist Party, the Center Party, the Liberal Party, the Labour Party, and the Green Party also suggested to transfer the decision-making power from the executive to the judiciary (Birkvad 2023).

None of these proposals were passed in Parliament but the government introduced three minor changes to strengthen the legal position of those accused of fraud (Ministry of Education and Research 2019).¹ First, the bill spelled out in law that children (and grandchildren) would not automatically be denaturalised if this was to happen to either their parents or grandparents, albeit there are exceptions to this rule.² Secondly, instead of introducing a statute of limitations in revocation cases, the bill implemented a 'proportionality assessment'. In making this assessment, UDI shall weigh the seriousness of the case against the person's connection to Norway (Ministry of Education and Research 2020). On the one hand, in cases where the person knowingly and actively has used more than one identity or has committed a serious crime, revocation should be considered proportional. On the other hand, citizenship cannot be revoked if the revocation decision disproportionately interferes with the concerned person, or their immediate family members. Here, UDI uses information about the person's participation in the labour market, language skills and educational attainment to measure their 'integration' and 'connection' to Norway. Additionally, UDI assesses the person's connection to Norway against her connection to her country of origin. The risk of *long-term* statelessness as a consequence of a revocation decision is also considered in the proportionality assessment.³ The final change that those accused of naturalisation fraud would be guaranteed personal attendance in appeal cases processed by the Immigration Appeals Board (UNE) and receive free legal aid during this process (Ministry of Education and Research 2019), albeit only covering a limited number of hours.

The citizenship revocation process

While these changes were debated in Parliament, the government instructed UDI to pause all case processing. After a three-year standstill, the backlog amounted to 1,000 cases (Jensen 2022). In other words, many cases got stuck in the administrative process. For the person targeted, the process typically begins when they receive a *decision* or a *notification* of possible revocation in the form of a letter. If they receive a decision, they have three weeks to submit a written appeal with the assistance from a lawyer. If the person receives a notification letter, it typically states that 'the foreigner' is suspected of furnishing incorrect information that was decisive for the granting of citizenship. If UDI finds it necessary, the person in question is summoned to one or more administrative

interviews to further inform the case. In the interviews, the defendant is questioned based on perceived contradictory information in their files. Local police officers often conduct the interviews on behalf of UDI (Brekke, Birkvad, and Erdal 2020). The burden of proof lies on the person, not the state, as most cases of citizenship revocation falls under administrative law. This means that the accused must prove that it is *more* than 50% likely they are speaking the truth about their identity, country of origin, region, etc.⁴ Based on the collected information, civil servants within UDI (often holding degrees in law or the social sciences) then decide whether to dismiss the case or revoke citizenship. The person can appeal the revocation decision to UNE. The appeal is considered by a board leader (who hold qualifications equivalent to a judge) and two laypersons in a closed meeting. In appeal cases, the burden of proof lies with UNE. Revocation cases can be tried before a court, but the person must cover the expenses on their own.

The stakes of citizenship revocation proceedings are high, but the outcome is not necessarily deportation. Roughly there are three different outcomes when the immigration authorities examine a case: the case can be dismissed if they find no sufficient grounds to revoke citizenship; citizenship can be revoked, and the person can apply for a new residence permit based on the correct information; or citizenship can be revoked, and the person can be deported if they are citizen of another state (Brekke, Birkvad, and Erdal 2020). Official statistics reveals that so far only 30 percent of the revocation cases initiated by the state have resulted in citizenship deprivation *and* deportation (Utlendingsnemnda 2022).⁵ Does this mean that the government's denaturalisation campaign was ineffective? Not necessarily. In this article, I will argue that the denaturalisation campaign was effective insofar as operating on the *affective* register of its targeted populations. To make this argument, I will situate the politics of denaturalisation within the broader framework of affective governance in the next section.

Affective governance and circulating emotions

In the last 10–15 years, we have witnessed an 'affective turn' in citizenship and migration studies. This turn can be read as a feminist, postcolonial and queer critique of the 'rational understanding of citizenship' (Ayata 2019). By focusing on the role of affect in the production of inclusion and exclusion, this turn seeks to destabilise citizenship as a 'purely rational and administrative exercise of state authority' (Di Gregorio and Merolli 2016; Fortier 2016). Affective citizenship provides a lens for seeing 'how some feelings attach themselves to citizenship and to how citizenship itself can evoke certain feelings' (Fortier 2016, 1038). In this view, emotions are deeply felt and embodied as well as social, relational, and public. Feelings attached to citizenship are unevenly distributed along the lines of gender, race, and class. Some feel safer than others and some citizens are deemed safer by others. The distribution of power therefore works not only through material and discursive forces, but also through affective governance (Fortier 2016, 1039).

With reference to Honig (2001), Fortier (2017) argues that affective governance is fundamental to the state-citizen relationship. The state exhibits an ambivalent attitude towards newcomers, as they are seen as sources of both *desire* and *anxiety*. Fortier (2017) examines the distribution of affect in integration and naturalisation policies. The guiding principle behind policies of integration and naturalisation, Fortier argues,

is the assumption that citizenship is desirable. While the UK (and other states in Europe and North America) rely on this assumption of desirability, they also express anxiety about the apparent weak desire for citizenship. The state wants to separate the ‘givers’ – legitimate, deserving migrants – from the ‘takers’ – bogus applicants, who displays the wrong desire for citizenship. In short, not all desires for citizenship are desirable for the state (Fortier 2017).

While affective governance is hardly a new phenomenon, some claim that it has proliferated in recent decades, fuelled by neoliberalism, securitisation of migration and right-wing populism (Bargetz 2020; Bigo 2002; Isin 2004). As formal equality increases in tandem with increasing naturalisation rates, states produce new *internal* hierarchizations, pitting ‘true’ citizens against ‘technical’ citizens (Volpp [2002], cited in Ayata 2019). In the ‘war on terror’ declared by many Western states, the line between ‘essential’ and ‘accidental’ citizens are (re)drawn (Nyers 2006), both legally and *affectively* (Franz 2015). When states try to appease the majority through securitisation measures, it is often at the expense of the insecurity of racialised minorities. Even those legally immune to deportation, such as US citizens may experience fear of deportation, as Asad (2020) has evidenced.

Denaturalisation campaigns in the US (Lenard 2020), the UK, France (Fargues 2019) and Norway are likely to increase such fears, making these important sites of affective power (cf. Fortier 2016). As mentioned previously, the existing scholarship on the revival of citizenship deprivation has focused on its legal, democratic, and normative implications (e.g. Birnie and Bauböck 2020; Gibney 2020; Lenard 2018; Macklin 2014), but left its affective facets under-examined. Beauchamps (2016; 2018) historical study of citizenship deprivation in France is, however, an instructive exception. Building on Sara Ahmed’s scholarship, Beauchamps examines the role of affect and emotions in governing mechanisms of belonging and repression. Historically, French authorities have associated undesirable subjects, such as dissidents, with fear and suspicion to justify denaturalisation (2016). Beauchamps’ study draws on Ahmed’s notion of ‘affective economy’, which is helpful for my analysis of denaturalisation in Norway as well.

According to Ahmed (2004), emotions circulate between bodies and signs.⁶ She argues against the notion that emotions are purely individual and private matters (Ahmed 2004). Instead, she argues that emotions are shaped in contact with objects (2014, 6). Ahmed’s economic model of emotions ‘suggests that while emotions do not positively reside in a subject or figure, they still work to bind subjects together’ (2004, 119). She says:

Emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place. So emotions are not simply something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take shape of, contact with others’. (2014, 10)

Emotions can bind some subjects together and simultaneously exclude others. Citizenship rhetoric works inclusionary by appeals to love and affection for the nation (binding some subjects together). Conversely, citizenship rhetoric works exclusionary by projecting fear on threatening others, for example purported terrorists and bogus asylum seekers and citizenship cheaters. According to Ahmed, such subjects become

fearful through the circulation of signs of fear (2004, 127). Fear ‘sticks’ to bodies that *could be* terrorists or bogus asylum seekers. It is this ‘could be’ that facilitates the power to detain suspect bodies and restrict their movement (2004, 135).

In my analysis, I take three key lessons from Ahmed. The first lesson is that emotions circulate economically and are unequally distributed. They tend to ‘stick’ more to certain bodies. Secondly, bodies (both individual and collective) take shape through emotions. Thirdly and related to the second lesson, emotions are relational. They move us closer or farther away from other ‘objects’. Here I understand ‘objects’ as other *subjects* or *imagined objects*, for example the ‘nation’ as an imagined community (Ahmed 2014, 8; Anderson 2016). In the following, I describe the labour of approaching research subjects in an economy of insecurity and fear.

Methodology and data: reflections on the role of emotions in qualitative research

Establishing contact with individuals and families facing denaturalisation turned out to be very difficult. Subjects of denaturalisation were not formally organised and do not constitute a meaningful sociological group (cf. Dahinden, Fischer, and Menet 2021). Therefore, I concentrated recruitment efforts in the Somali, Palestinian and Afghan communities in Norway, as the majority of revocation targets originate from these countries. Initially, these attempts produced meager results. Intermediaries told me that people were reluctant to discuss citizenship revocation with outsiders because it was a stigmatised and sensitive topic to them. In the Somali community in Norway, fear and mistrust of Norwegian authorities also circulated (Brekke, Birkvad, and Erdal 2020). My role as an independent researcher was questioned, as some feared my research was associated with the immigration authorities (cf. Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati 2014). Thus, it is likely that my position as an ‘apparent outsider’ – a public university employee, representing the white majority – was a barrier to gaining their trust. The breakthrough came when *Utrop* (a multicultural Norwegian newspaper) and *Norsom News* (a Norwegian-Somali newspaper) posted ads on their digital platforms, which especially generated interest from people in the Somali community. At the same time, immigration lawyers, civic organisations, and gatekeepers from my previous research projects (Birkvad 2019; Brekke, Birkvad, and Erdal 2020) helped me find interviewees.

After nearly two years of recruiting and interviewing, I had reached 28 individuals in total (16 men and 12 women).⁷ The participants were all born abroad and had immigrated to Norway at all stages of life. The length of residence in Norway varied from 11 to 25 years. The interviewees (or their parents) originated from Somalia (18), Palestine (4) and various countries in Asia (7).⁸ Four participants faced revocation by extension of their parent’s case (Ismael, Aisha, Yasmine and Toufik) and were not suspected of fraud themselves.⁹ Some interviewees told me that their entire family faced revocation, while others claimed they risked family separation, as only the parent(s) risked revocation and deportation. Three out of four interviewees also had family members who were *indirectly* affected by their ongoing revocation case (see Table 1). Applications for various permits (family reunion, permanent residence permit and citizenship) were put on hold until the revocation case of the reference person was decided.

Table 1. Overview of research participants.

Pseudonym	Country of origin	Generation	Years in Norway	Case status	Duration of case	Deportation notification	Interviews with state authorities	Affected family members ^a
Maryam & Ismael (mother & son)	Somalia	Immigrant & 1.5	15–20 & 10–15	Waiting for initial decision	2 years	Yes	2	0
Hadiya & Aisha (mother & daughter)	Somalia	Immigrant & 1.5	20–25 & 15–20	Waiting for initial decision	<0.5 years	Yes	3	1
Zakaria)	Somalia	Immigrant	20–25	Notified	2 years	Yes	N/A	2
Yasmine	Somalia	1.5	10–15	Waiting for initial decision	5 years	Yes	1	3
Adam & Suraya (spouses)	Country in Asia	Immigrants	15–20 & 10–15	Waiting for initial decision	<0.5 years	Yes	1	3
Yacub	Palestine	Immigrant	20–25	Waiting for decision on deprivation	5 years	Dismissed	1	0
Khaled	Palestine	Immigrant	20–25	Waiting for decision on deprivation	5 years	Dismissed	0	0
Zahid	Somalia	Immigrant	15–20	Waiting for initial decision	0.5 years	Yes	3	2
Jibril	Somalia	Immigrant	10–15	Notified	4 years	Yes	0	3
Masood	Country in Asia	Immigrant	20–25	Deprived (stateless)	—	Yes	1	0
Emre	Country in Asia	1.5	20–25	Dismissed	—	No	0	2
Sarah & Abdi (spouses)	Somalia	Immigrants	10–15 & 15–20	Deprived, waiting for appeal	5 years	Yes	1	5
Leila	Somalia	Immigrant	10–15	Waiting for initial decision	5 years	Yes	1	2
Nadia	Somalia	Immigrant	20–25	Deprived (stateless), requested reversal	8 years	Yes	N/A	1
Dina	Somalia	Immigrant	20–25	Waiting for initial decision	0.5 years	Yes	3	3
Shakir	Somalia	Immigrant	20–25	Waiting for initial decision	6 years	Yes	1	0
Yusuf	Somalia	Immigrant	15–20	Waiting for initial decision	5 years	Yes	2	1
Samir	Palestine	Immigrant	10–15	Waiting for initial decision	0.5 years	Yes	0	3
Karima	Country in Asia	Immigrant	20–25	Waiting for initial decision	0.5 years	Yes	0	0
Toufik	Palestine	1.5	20–25	Waiting for appeal	9 years	Yes	0	3
Ali	Country in Asia	1.5	10–15	Waiting for initial decision	0.5 years	Yes	3	2
Muhammed	Somalia	Immigrant	20–25	Waiting for initial decision	2 years	Yes	2	2
Jamilah	Somalia	Immigrant	15–20	Notified	<0.5 years	Yes	0	2
Amina	Somalia	Immigrant	15–20	Notified	<0.5 years	Yes	0	N/A

^aChildren, spouses, or other relatives.

The interviews were conducted in their homes (in Oslo and beyond), at the University of Oslo, in cafes, via telephone and video calls. I asked them about their daily lives, migration trajectories, experiences with the Norwegian immigration system, naturalisation, the revocation process and its effects on their families and ethnic communities, as well as their views on the legal and political dimensions of citizenship fraud. Although the interview guide had no explicit focus on emotions, the interviews were filled to the brim with them. Some, I realised, were not seeking legal but emotional care. Since they associated negative emotions with the topic, they rarely or never talked about it. On several occasions, interviewees burst into tears, either expressing despair or cathartic relief from speaking about it. Feelings of anger and frustration were also directed at me, as I was seen to represent the white majority incapable of understanding their experiences. These examples illustrate that the qualitative interview is a 'situated affective encounter' (Ayata et al. 2019): a relational processes in which both the researcher and researched affect each other. During the two years of fieldwork, I followed my participants' feelings of frustration and fatigue but only to a certain point. Unlike the participants, I could withdraw from the field (Wajsberg 2020). I faced no threat of revocation and deportation, as one interviewee put it. These interview encounters, even those marked by animosity, hold analytical significance by revealing broader relations of power. They displayed inequalities between researcher and researched in terms of exposure to citizenship revocation as well as broader structures of racism.

The affective intensity of the interview encounters drew my attention to emotions as an analytical prism. According to Gabriel and Ulus (2015, cited in Ayata et al. (2019), emotions can be observed in different ways: 'people might openly state how they feel, they might recount a story or anecdote intended to explain their feelings, or they might indicate feelings through their actions and bodily expressions'. Ahmed (2014) adds *text* itself as carrying and shaping emotions. Taking public discourse as her object of study, Ahmed shows how figures of speech (e.g. metaphors and metonyms) are saturated with affect. I take inspiration from both methods of studying emotion in my analysis. I read the interview as a corporeal, idiosyncratic encounter between interviewer and interviewee, where emotions are performed and circulated through body language and shifts in intensity (e.g. tone of voice, crying, gesticulation). Moreover, I interpret the *output* of this encounter (the written transcription) as an affective text and pay attention to how specific words carry emotions.

All interviews (except two) were transcribed and subsequently coded in NVivo.¹⁰ For this article, the material was sorted into 19 categories that either referred to explicit emotions (e.g. 'fear', 'exhaustion') or points of contact with the authorities that elicited strong emotions (e.g. the letter of notification and police interviews).¹¹ I also examined the interrelations of categories, specifically how emotions shaped their bodies (e.g. references to bodily distress) and their effects on their social relations (family, diasporic communities and the nation). Based on several rounds of inductive coding, grouping, and re-grouping, I ended up with three findings: (i) pain, anger and alienation from the national body, (ii) fear and destabilisation of families and diasporic communities, and (iii) exhaustion and self-estrangement. Before I elaborate on these three findings, I will situate the interviewees within the bureaucratic process of citizenship deprivation.

Situating the interviewees within the bureaucratic process of citizenship revocation

The interviewees were in different stages of the revocation process (see Table 1): four interviewees had recently been notified of revocation; twenty-four interviewees were waiting for the first decision by UDI (twenty of these had undertaken one or several administrative interviews); one couple, Sarah and Abdi, were waiting for their appeal to be processed by UNE; two individuals, Masood and Nadia, had been deprived of citizenship and were currently living in Norway as stateless; lastly, Emre's revocation case had been dismissed.

A few interviewees admitted to having furnished incorrect information in applications for asylum, while the majority contested the claims of dishonesty and fraud made by UDI. However, my intention in this article is not to assess their truth claims, but to shed light on citizenship revocation from their perspective. Nearly all interviewees found the bureaucratic process itself unpredictable and difficult to navigate. The interviewees highlighted several problematic aspects. As citizenship revocation belong to the realm of administrative law, the burden of proof rested on their shoulders. Despite answering all questions in the administrative interviews and providing evidence to support their case, they found it difficult to shake off the suspicion. Moreover, several interviewees said the police did not disclose the source of suspicion explicitly during the administrative interviews. Jibril (10–15 years in Norway, Somalia) noted that, 'we cannot defend ourselves against something we have no idea what is'.¹² The communication with UDI after the administrative interviews was also described as poor by many. They were given little if any concrete information about the status of their case and its timeline (also found in Brekke, Birkvad, and Erdal 2020). The duration of their ongoing cases – on average, four and a half years – gave room for further frustration and uncertainty. Despite promises of due process from the government (Ministry of Education and Research 2019), many expressed profound insecurities about their legal positions within these processes. In the next sections, I shed light on the constellations of emotions and alienation produced from the interviewees' encounters with the immigration bureaucracy.

Emotions and estrangement in processes of citizenship revocation

Pain, anger, and alienation from the national body

Legally and symbolically speaking, denaturalisation means transforming citizens into foreigners (Winter and Previsic 2019). In notification letters and decisions, UDI uses the legal term 'foreigner' (*utlending*) to refer to the recipient. This label caused pain for those who identified as Norwegians. For instance, Yacub (20–25 years in Norway, Palestine) spoke at length about how the label affected him:

I just think about the letters you receive (...). It's not hurtful. I know I'm a foreigner, but to type it, is that really necessary? 'You foreigner', we know how insulting that is. 'You foreigner', that's not nice! Why do UDI use these words when (...) I'm more Norwegian than they are! (...) you need to get something [in return], say 'thank you for your contribution'. I'm not the person who just sits at home and does nothing in Norwegian society (...) I know I won't be deported, but still, this process, you have no idea how much it took from me.

Although Yacub said the label ‘foreigner’ was not hurtful, he called it insulting. The ‘sticky word’ (cf. Ahmed 2004) discredited his contributions to Norwegian society, which he listed as working in a frontline occupation during the COVID-19 pandemic and doing various types of volunteer work in his local community. He was ‘happy’ about not being deported yet he felt ‘hurt inside’. It was not the fear of deportation that bothered him but rather the tedious process, which he said constituted a significant financial burden and required him to have a strong psyche. He elaborated:

Imagine, if we sit in a room together and I say to you: ‘You are an idiot, idiot, idiot’, every day, ‘you fucking foreigner, fucking foreigner, fucking foreigner’. Then what happens to you? Eventually you will tell yourself: ‘I’m a fucking foreigner, fucking foreigner. I must [go] out, out, out’.

To Yacub, the legal term ‘foreigner’ was a reminder of outsidersness. Although he tried to resist, the word and its negative connotations stuck to him. After he found out his citizenship was at stake, Yacub was reminded of what a relative of his, Khaled, had said to him some years ago:

Remember, Yacub, you must not think that you are Norwegian [*nordmann*]. And he was right. I’m not Norwegian. But I was thinking and acting like a Norwegian. And that was wrong (...) it woke me up. I’m a foreigner. I’m not like Harald, I’m not like Håkon, I’m not like Karl.

To his relative, Khaled (interviewed separately), the notification letter was less of a shock, as he had worried in advance that this day might come. Khaled had lived in a large Norwegian city most of his time in Norway, and according to Yacub, been immersed in a ‘foreign milieu’ and had always ‘felt foreign’. Unlike Khaled, Yacub proudly identified as Norwegian before facing denaturalisation. Yacub said he had ‘plenty of Norwegian friends’ and considered himself ‘one of them’. His body, in this sense, was more open to being wounded. As he saw no immediate end to the process, his wound was kept open and inflamed by repeated bureaucratic and self-imposed stings (‘foreigner’, ‘idiot’). The notification of citizenship deprivation woke him up, as if from a dream. He painfully realised that he was not equal to Harald, Håkon and Karl; all names connoting racial-ethnic belonging to Norway.

For Zahid (15–20 years in Norway, Somalia), the revocation process initiated against him was *additional* evidence of alienation from the national body. His citizenship was questioned by the immigration authorities because they suspected that he was either a citizen of a neighbouring country (because a close family member was citizen of another country) or that he originated from another region in Somalia (based on remittance records). But according to Zahid, these were nothing but empty allegations. During the three consecutive days of questioning, he turned the questions back to the police officer:

‘Why are we sitting here? (...) [Is it] because I’m a black Norwegian and I got my passport in a legal way? [Is that] why you are asserting your white supremacy? [To demonstrate] that you are more right[eous] than me? Why are you interviewing me? Can you just answer me?’ She couldn’t answer (...) how will we be equal Norwegians when an immigrant Norwegian is suspected and interviewed by a white Norwegian ... what kind of law is this? Why do they say we’re equal, that we’re the same? It’s pure nonsense. That’s what they want, differential treatment.

According to Zahid, the crucial difference between the police officer and himself was not the mode of citizenship acquisition (natural-born vs. naturalised) but the colour of their skin. In this narrative of racial antagonism, he played the role as a ‘black Norwegian’ who had lawfully acquired citizenship, fiercely opposed by a ‘white Norwegian’, who had the backing of the law. He seemed to argue that the citizenship law was deployed not to shed light on inconsistencies in their immigration records but to expel ‘black Norwegians’ from the national body. Rather than seeing the law as ‘an expression of [his] intimate will’, Zahid constructed it as a ‘violent imposition’ (Honig 2001, cited in Fortier 2017, 15), wilfully enforced to make him suffer. Thus, in encountering the immigration authorities, his ‘proximity to whiteness’ became a ‘point of alienation’ (cf. Ahmed 2010, 156). To him, such encounters unveiled the failed promise of equal citizenship, as the law exclusively expressed the will of white Norwegians.

Fear and destabilisation of families and communities

Although laws regulating citizenship deprivation are ‘race-neutral’, research shows that migrant and diasporic communities are disproportionately targeted (e.g. Gibney 2020; Naqvi 2022). The intensification of denaturalisation in Norway was part of a broader policy package, including revocation of residence permits and cessation of refugee status. People of Somali descent were overrepresented in revocation cases and the cessation paragraph only applied to that immigrant group (Brekke, Birkvad, and Erdal 2020). The interview material showed that the fear of deportation – *deportability* (de Genova 2002) – not only disturbed the individual psyche but *circulated* between individuals and families, particularly within the Somali community. Exposure to denaturalisation gave shape to tense, stressed and restless bodies, which were hyper-alert to signs of deportation. Examples of such signs, or ‘situational triggers’ (Enriquez and Millán 2019), were seeing police officers in the streets and ‘suspicious’ people in their workplaces, reading news stories about revocation or hearing public statements by anti-immigration politicians on TV. Jibril (10–15 years in Norway, Somalia) described how fear surfaced in different spheres of life:

We left our home country because of terrorism, and now we experience a new form of terrorism (...) Their method is simply to scare you. You are afraid every day, constantly. You ask yourself (...) when will you be kicked out? The kids think: when will we be apprehended at school? (...) The kids have nightmares. My wife, too. If you hear a sound, someone knocking on the door, then you think the police are here. If they [the kids] see random police officers drive or walk past them, then you think that they’re after them, that they will be apprehended, kicked out.

According to Jibril, the Norwegian state governed through ‘scares’ and ‘terror’, emotions that could be triggered by a simple knock on the door. The shift of personal pronouns also indicates that fear did not reside in him but moved sideways between members of his family (cf. Ahmed 2014): if ‘they’, his children, saw police officers in the street, ‘you’ thought that officers were after ‘them’. This fear did not only engender hyper-alertness during the hours of the day but also haunted them in their sleep.

The connection between sleep deprivation and fear of citizenship deprivation was underscored by several interviewees. Sarah, Abdi (10–15 and 15–20 years in Norway, Somalia) and their children had their Norwegian citizenship revoked but waited for

their appeal to be processed by UNE. Sarah said she had been admitted to the hospital recently. She was tense, restless and couldn't sleep, as she feared deportation to a country that would 'destroy them'. These excerpts indicate that fear, bodily tension, and restlessness made them increasingly turn inwards, enclosing themselves from the outside world. Nadia (20–25 years in Norway, Somalia) had experienced an unannounced raid by the police ten years ago, which marked the starting point of a lengthy, complicated denaturalisation process that ultimately resulted in citizenship stripping and statelessness. According to her husband, Nadia had installed two additional safety locks on their door. He said: 'She was a sociable person, [but] after all this she became closed off and had no contact with friends and minimal contact with family'.

Shutting out friends and family also implied turning away from people in the Somali community. To some, this turning away was caused by mistrust and fear of information being leaked to the authorities. The backdrop to these concerns was the 'Mahad case'. According to UNE, this case was opened based on an *anonymous* tip from a person within the Somali community. Among Norwegian-Somalis, rumours soon spread that several revocation cases were based on 'insider tips' (Fjeld and Befring 2017). These rumours partially de-centered the object of fear from the state to people from the same community. Abdi (15–20 years in Norway, Somalia) reflected on the implications of such de-centering of fear:

(...) we do not trust each other in the community. We are scared of each other. We are not united. We are unable to defend ourselves with a common voice. So that makes us exposed (...) to all sorts of attacks.

In this excerpt, fear works by tearing the Somali community apart, at least, the idea of the Somali community as a collective body. According to Abdi, such dissolution was detrimental to collective mobilisation against the state.

The fear of being surveilled by the state (or members from their community) made some interviewees limit the use of social media, including communication with friends and family abroad (see also Brekke, Birkvad, and Erdal 2020). Effectively this fear shaped a sense of curtailment of individual freedom. Some likened it to 'imprisonment' and 'detainment', which led some to consider leaving Norway, regardless of the outcome of their case. Dina (20–25 years in Norway, Somalia) had decided to move from Norway with her daughter. She couldn't bear living with 'worries for many years', as she put it. Muhammed (20–25 years in Norway, Somalia) claimed he knew friends who had already left Norway to escape the sense of containment. In his account, these people had uttered that they could 'breathe easier' because they could connect with relatives on Facebook, no longer fearing its repercussions. Such stories demonstrate the potent effects of emotions. Emotions *literally* make bodies move (Ahmed 2014). In this case, fear and worries induced self-deportation.

Exhaustion and self-estrangement

Worries among the interviewees about being perpetually tied up in the bureaucratic revocation process were not unfounded. Revocation cases take between one and nine years to process, according to the Immigration Appeals Board (UNE 2022). Many of the interviewees had waited a long time for the first decision on revocation, some up to six years. The

lengthy wait was described as exhausting. Some believed the bureaucracy tried to wear them out by imposing waiting as a tool of power (Khosravi 2019). According to Shakir (20–25 years in Norway, Somalia), being entangled in the bureaucratic process was like being bit by a poisonous snake. He said: ‘When it [the state] bites you, it doesn’t eat you right away. You will die from the poison (...) it’s inhumane’. Rather than a clear-cut, final decision depriving him of citizenship, he felt as if he was gradually dying from the poison inflicted by the Norwegian state.

The bureaucratic process was tiresome, stressful, and left bodily marks. Diarrhoea, migraine, heart palpitations, and elevated blood pressure were physical symptoms reported by the interviewees. Leila (10–15 years in Norway, Somalia) was a single mother, living in a remote part of Norway. She spent most her time working and caring for her youngest child, who suffered from multiple serious illnesses. One of Leila’s biggest worries was that her child would not get the medical help they needed in case of deportation to Somalia. The aggregated ‘psychic load’ had made Leila lose weight, as she explained:

I think about my children all the time. The day I received the letter [of revocation] I weighed over 100 kilos. Now I weigh 70 kilos, without even exercising, only because of rumination and sleep deprivation. People ask me, ‘are you ok? What happened to you?’ But they are not aware of my situation, so I don’t tell them what’s going on.

Following an emotional outburst later in the interview, she said: ‘I’m sorry, when I think about my situation, my emotions take over. Because I am (...) really tired. Only God knows how tired I am’. She had kept her plights to herself. The statement underscored the invisibility of the pain that she made visible by sharing her feelings in the interview. To bear witness to pain is to authenticate it (Ahmed 2014, 29). This visibility is crucial because deportability tends to isolate and silence people (Horsti and Pirkkalainen 2020).

The interviewees described their bodies slowing down in tandem with the denaturalisation process coming to a halt (as mentioned above, the processing of revocation cases was paused between 2017 and 2020). Despite feeling exhausted, Leila was determined to continue working: ‘I go to work, do my tasks, but (...) I function like a robot’. Ismael (10–15 years in Norway, Somalia), who faced revocation and deportation to Somalia by extension of his mother’s revocation case, expressed ambivalent feelings. On the one hand, he said he was motivated by anger. After they were notified about revocation, he had got a more ‘meaningful job’ because he wanted to make a positive change in society. Working did not rid him of burdensome thoughts and feelings altogether, but only gave him temporary relief:

What’s the point? It seems so comfortable to be dead, like ... it’s fantastic. I don’t see why people are dreading death (...) it’s so quiet and peaceful (...) because I’m so freaking tired (...) And my mother is, too. We are extremely tired. It feels like I’m 100 years old but I’m only in my 20s (...) I feel like a zombie (...) Just living, but not living.

‘Robots’ and ‘zombies’ are forceful metaphors that signify mechanically moving bodies, exhausted of energy and purpose. These metaphors too point to the particularity of the interviewees’ legal precarity. Although they experienced a form of ‘sticky time’ (Griffiths 2014) associated with prisoners, asylum seekers and immigrant detainees, their lives were not completely ‘put on hold’, nor were they confined in spatial terms. Quite the contrary:

most interviewees carried on with their daily routines (cf. Brekke, Birkvad, and Erdal 2020). They went to work and attended classes, but they were not entirely present. Maryam, Ismael's mother, said: 'Sometimes I'm at work, I don't know where I am'. Zakaria (20–25 years in Norway, Somalia) described a similar feeling: 'You have to keep working and keep studying (...) [but] you lose focus. You're not quite in place'. These excerpts describe a feeling of dissonance between the location of their body and their emotions. Being pushed towards the 'pale of law' (Arendt 2017) unsettled their sense of being in the world. Statements of not being 'in place' suggest that their bodies were 'out of place' (Ahmed 2010). Having their legal standing questioned over time led to exhaustion and self-estrangement.

Outlining the circles of alienation and their implications for existing and future research

Whereas historians have brought human struggles of citizenship deprivation to life through archives and legal documents (e.g. Beauchamps 2018; Frost 2021; Weil 2012; Zalc 2020), this article has examined first-hand experiences of denaturalisation in the twenty-first century. The interviewees were not physically expelled by the Norwegian state, but still deeply entangled in processes of citizenship revocation. By drawing on Ahmed's economic and relational view of emotions, I have examined what emotions circulated amid these processes and how these emotions shaped social relations and actions. The analysis distinguished between three constellations of emotions and alienation: (i) pain, anger, and alienation from the national body fear, (ii) destabilisation of families and diasporic communities, (iii) exhaustion and self-estrangement.

First, some interviewees described feelings of anger, pain, and alienation from the national body. Zahid, for instance, expressed anger as he read citizenship deprivation as *yet another* expression of racism. Anger, which we usually think of as a destructive emotion, also has creative potential (Ahmed 2014). Through anger, Zahid mobilised a critique of what he considered the racially coded promise of equal citizenship. Being targeted by citizenship deprivation only alienated him *further* from Norway as an 'imagined community' (Anderson 2016). However, for those who had identified as Norwegian, being targeted by citizenship deprivation was a painful shock, capable of shifting their affective orientation towards the nation. A case in point is Yacub, who had invested considerable time and energy to be socially accepted as Norwegian. Even though the deportation order against him was dismissed, he felt rejected and estranged from Norway as his national home.

Secondly, the state's intensified efforts to expose 'citizenship cheaters' stirred up fear of surveillance and deportation. The interviewees described how fear circulated immediately after the 'Mahad case' broke the news and the government announced its pursuit of 'cheaters'. The object of fear glid from the state to potential adversaries within the Somali community. Since fear was no longer contained by a single object – the state – mistrust and suspicion grew (cf. Ahmed 2004, 125). The potential of being targeted by the law (Agamben 1998), fearing both surveillance by the state and people from the same community, gave shape to tense, restless bodies. Some went into hiding and became increasingly isolated, while others self-deported, paradoxically escaping the country that gave them refuge in the first place.

Finally, the lengthy wait for legal closure was described as emotionally exhausting. As their claims for Norwegian citizenship were questioned, their place in the world became ambiguous, even sometimes negated (cf. Belton 2015). Some of the interviewees claimed their lives became increasingly mechanical and ‘zombie’-like, followed by a creeping sense of estrangement from themselves and their social surroundings. As such, these experiences resemble Ahmed’s conception of alienation as a *structure of feeling*, which feels like ‘a weight that (...) holds you down and keeps you apart’ (2010, 168). In other words, the constellation of exhaustion and self-estrangement was not only a personally embodied burden (holding them down) but also led to social isolation (keeping them apart).

These findings lend themselves to comparison with other disadvantaged groups in the migration-citizenship nexus. Targets of denaturalisation share the plight of stateless people in feeling ‘out of place’ and misaligned with their place in the world (Belton 2015). Studies from the UK has shown that fears of deportation and surveillance have destabilised families and migrant communities heavily targeted by citizenship deprivation (Naqvi 2022) and passport removal measures (Kapoor and Narkowicz 2019). Research on the US context have also noted that fear of deportation is widespread in Latino communities. Even people with relatively secure legal status may express fears of deportation as an effect of their proximity to undocumented family members or friends (Abrego 2019; Asad 2020; Golash-Boza 2019).

Feelings of uncertainty and exhaustion are commonly found among migrants undergoing time and energy consuming asylum (Griffiths 2014) and naturalisation procedures (Fortier 2021). Fortier (2021) argues that integration and naturalisation procedures make and unmake citizens and migrants, indefinitely holding many applicants in the metaphorical ‘waiting room of citizenship’. Unlike applicants for citizenship – as well as stateless people, undocumented migrants, and asylum seekers – the participants in this study *had* already passed the waiting room. As naturalised citizens, they were legally on par with the majority population, but now faced utter expulsion. As such, their experiences disrupt the narrative of linear progression from ‘alien’ to ‘citizen’ (cf. Fortier 2021). This degradation, or the prospect of it, provoked feelings of pain and anger, leading to (intensified) disaffection for the nation-state. Interestingly, this situation provided a space for denaturalised subjects to express radical critiques of the state, which hopeful applicants in the waiting room for citizenship may be more reluctant to do.

To sum up, ‘what do emotions *do*’ (Ahmed 2014) in processes of denaturalisation? Fear and exhaustion tended to isolate and estrange community members from one another, which made some consider self-deportation, while pain and anger either led to resignation or motivated acts of resistance against the state. Still, as the ‘revival of citizenship deprivation’ gathers force and spreads across the world (Birnie and Bauböck 2020), more research is needed on how subjects navigate processes of denaturalisation and what role emotions play in these processes. In what ways do such emotions conform, challenge, or exceed state powers? The distribution of such emotions seems to be animated by different positions in hierarchies of race-ethnicity, gender, and class (cf. Bargetz 2015). Therefore, it is important that future research address the effects of denaturalisation policies across social categories of difference.

Notes

1. At that time, the government included the Conservative Party, the Progress Party, the Liberal Party, and the Christian Democratic Party.
2. If UDI finds that the child does not exhibit a so-called ‘strong connection to the realm’, their citizenship can still be revoked. The child’s length of residence in Norway, language skills, schooling and participation in leisure activities are used to measure their connection to Norway, or lack thereof. Children under the age of 18 cannot lose their citizenship if they by that become stateless and in no simple way can acquire citizenship in another country (NNA, 26(3)).
3. Norway is bound by the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness and the 1997 European Convention on Nationality, but according to the latter convention (letter 7B), cases of fraud are excepted.
4. In cases that fall under criminal legislation, the case must be proven beyond any reasonable doubt.
5. Many cases are unprocessed by UDI. But since the new rules were implemented, UNE has processed 117 appeal cases. UNE reversed 28 percent (33 cases) of UDI’s decisions on revocation and upheld 72 percent (84 cases) of the decisions. Among those receiving a revocation decision, 43 percent (36 cases) received a deportation order (either permanent or temporary), 37 percent (31 cases) were granted new permits, and 20 percent (14 cases) resulted in neither deportation nor new permits. The latter pertain to cases where parents received a deportation order, but not their children. In these cases, the consequence was that the entire family left Norway (Utlendingsnemnda 2022).
6. Some distinguish between affect and emotion, but I follow Ahmed in her argument against making such sharp distinctions, as it risks perpetuating the cartesian mind/body split.
7. Including three (Muhammed, Jamilah and Amina) persons, who were interviewed in above-mentioned studies.
8. To increase anonymization, I have categorized the residency in five-year intervals and lumped together different countries in Asia into one category (see [Table 1](#)). I refer to the country of origin reported by the interviewees.
9. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms.
10. A research assistant helped with transcribing, while coding was done by the author. The project was pre-approved by The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (reference number 329494).
11. I divided the interview material in two. I examine responses to the accusation of naturalization fraud in another article.
12. To add context to the quotes, I present the interviewees’ residence time in Norway and their country of origin.

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