The disjuncture between migrants' experiences and the institutional view of time in work inclusion processes

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# Abstract

This paper explores the interplay between migrants’ experiences of their work inclusion process and governments’ guidelines regulating this policy field. Drawing on an institutional ethnographic research approach, the paper departs from the standpoint of migrants’ subjective experiences of the work inclusion process. By combining interviews, observations, and governmental documents from a Norwegian context, we reveal a disjuncture between the migrants’ experiences and the institutional guidelines. We assert that the notion of time is central to this understanding. In the migrants’ view, work is a sub-ordinated resource alongside other resources, to become citizens of full value in the host country. Inclusion is thus viewed as an ongoing, though non-linear process. Conversely, migration policies are enacted in a one-dimensional and linear view, enforcing labour as the means to an end. In this latter perspective, taking part in the labour force as soon as possible is a resource for inclusion into society in general, due to a strong ‘employment ethic’ characterising the societal discourse. This disjuncture can explain why migrants experience inclusion as challenging, and why governments’ migration policies struggle. Based on our findings we argue that there is a need to reconsider the guidelines for migrant work inclusion programmes and measures, to be more responsive to the experiences of migrants targeted by these programs. The theoretical novelty of the paper lies in highlighting the under-addressed issue of time in migration studies, more specifically the disjuncture of how time is viewed as a resource from a subjective and an institutional perspective.

# Introduction

Wait. That's something immigrants do a lot. Because you're given no choice. You're a little bit put in a box. This is the box you are, and don't get out of it, and don't try to be creative. Stay within the box. Don't move. And if you do move, your benefit will be cut off.

This quote is from a migrant talking about her experiences of meeting with the Norwegian welfare regime and more specifically, the support programs dedicated to promoting migrants’ work inclusion. The quote addresses one of contemporary welfare states’ prominent issues – the struggles of including an increasing migrant population in the host society. Inclusion into the labour market is considered one of the key factors for migrants' societal integration (European Commission, 2020). Yet, in most European countries, migrants, particularly non-EU nationals, are less likely to participate in the labour market and have higher unemployment rates than country nationals (De Coninck & Solano, 2023). Different factors at the individual, organisational and societal levels, and the interplay between the levels are identified as prevailing barriers (Groutsis et al., 2023).

In this paper, we explore the interplay between migrants’ experiences, and the institutional measures taken to promote migrants’ work inclusion into host countries' labour markets. Research suggests that politics is essential to ensure access to rights, opportunities, and services to tackle the challenges migrants face in employment (De Coninck & Solano, 2023). Previous research also finds that migrants often end up in precarious work, including experiencing under-employment and discrimination (Diedrich & Risberg, 2023; Risberg & Romani, 2022). Various reports show that policies fail and that migration issues top the list of the most hotly debated public issues. This paper addresses this debate, by exploring how migration policies, found in institutional guidelines and support programs for work inclusion of migrants align with the experiences of the target group exposed to these policies. As the initial quote reveals – time and a potential disjuncture between individual and institutional time trajectories appear as a recurring, yet under-discussed topic.

In this paper, we thus challenge the traditional view of subjective versus measured and objective time related to migrant inclusion and instead explore how time can be viewed as a resource for different social actors and purposes (Hernes, 2022). We argue that this understanding can contribute to a more nuanced picture of why the inclusion of migrants into the host country is found challenging –both from an individual and an institutional point of view. As people and institutions may have different needs and resources, it indicates that their views of time do not necessarily align. This calls for exploring how different views of time as a resource embedded in the inclusion process can shed light on these struggles. We find that from the migrants’ perspective, time is found non-linear and multiple, stemming from various (lack of) resources, while the institutional view of time is more streamlined and one-dimensional, viewing work as a conditional resource for inclusion in general. Notably, time is seen as an essential resource in the inclusion process, but for different reasons.

People included in this study, encompass both refugees fleeing from conflicts, or for religious or political reasons, asylum seekers, as well as people arriving for family reunification or staying on work permits. Despite their various reasons for residing in Norway, we found they had many similar challenges entering the host country's labour market. We thus refer to them as migrants but highlight the differences when relevant.

# Previous research

Temporariness is immanent in migration processes because it involves mobility in both space and time. Within anthropology, studies of temporality have long traditions in exploring cultural aspects of time, for example distinguishing an ecological perception of time in a village, from the Western structural time (Evans-Pritchard, 1939). Cohn (2018) studied how migrants construct time and place in an interplay, including a *being-time*, referring to everyday and mundane activities, and a *meta-time* related to aspired future events. Combining this view of time with the journey from one destination to another, he argues constructs migrants’ view of migration as a dynamic, nonlinear process which can explain the complexity of immigration.

Acknowledging temporality and the notion of time is however a recent development within the field of migration research from an organizational point of view. Bendixsen and Eriksen (2024) assert that time – experienced as endless waiting and precariousness in the asylum-seeking process – is found intentional, to prevent other people from applying for asylum. They argue that the strict conductance of welfare rights is used as a neo-liberal technique of control and management. A recent Norwegian study of Somali- and Arabic-speaking clients of The Norwegian Welfare and Labour Services (NAV) (Friberg et al., 2024) showed that these clients experienced more waiting for services, as well as less satisfaction with support measures, compared to other clients. Time was essential, as both the migrants and the included caseworkers reported that time was a scarce resource. More specifically, caseworkers having less time (due to high caseloads) were found to see migrants’ work inclusion challenges as a problem related to the migrants’ lack of inner motivation and incapacity to utilize NAVs inclusion measures (see also Djuve & Kavli, 2019). They tended to view these struggles as migrants *being* the problem. Comparatively, caseworkers having fewer caseloads and thus more time to follow-up, addressed these challenges to the migrant’s complex situation related to facing enduring physical and mental health issues, an extensive caregiving role in the family, and practicalities such as poor housing conditions. This latter group of caseworkers rather tended to see migrant clients as *having* or *facing* problems, referring to external causes. Consequently, time was found essential in premising and constructing the caseworkers’ view of the migrants (Friberg et al., 2024). Synnes (2022) had similar experiences in her study of Polish migrants living in precarity in Norway. From an institutional point of view, they were seen as a mobile and temporary labour force which should return to their home country if they can’t work and need welfare services. The migrants themselves report facing a complex situation with economic, social and emotional dimensions, which make return not considered an easy alternative despite a very challenging life situation.

In this paper, we seek to incorporate issues of the temporality of migration processes into the study of organisations. According to Hernes (2022) bringing temporal experience into organization studies is a relatively recent undertaking. Time is still largely seen in the sense of a traditional time trajectory, referring to a shape of time that is implicitly assumed in the present-past-future view. Organizational scholars increasingly argue that there is a need to distinguish between subjective and objective time (Hernes, 2022; Shipp & Jansen, 2020). However, rather than separate social and measured time, Hernes (2022) argue that we should investigate how they are translated into one another, as both are indispensable for the functioning of social groups (p. 100). One alternative is to focus on how objective time becomes differently constructed by different social actors because social groups and organizations construct objectively measured time differently (Hernes, 2022). Turning the attention to how time is viewed *as a resource* for different actors and purposes, may be more helpful. Hernes (2022) suggests defining time as a resource that works as a ‘stock or reserve available to meet a need’ in organisations (Hernes 2022, p. 106). For example, time can be seen as a resource because it is used as a timing device, calculating incentives and norms for the performance of certain tasks (Hernes 2022, citing Hassard, 1996). Shifting the focus from how time is viewed traditionally in regards to a time trajectory, to viewing how time is experienced as a resource, allows us to investigate how subjective and institutional needs, expectations and experiences may differ. Such an investigation also includes studying the implications of a lack of time resources - from various standpoints.

# An institutional ethnographic research approach

Drawing on Institutional ethnography (Smith, 1987) as an ontological and epistemological research approach, our study is based on the standpoint of the individual migrant. According to Smith (1987), departing from the standpoint of individuals’ experiences is pivotal in knowledge production because people’s doings are always socially coordinated. Thus, investigating people's experiences can provide us with a systematically developed consciousness of society from within’ (Smith, 2006, p. 49). This calls for including migrants’ subjective experiences as they do not happen or exist in a vacuum but entail information about the institutional organisations governing migration policies, in which the migrants are embedded.

The notion of ‘work’ is an orienting concept in institutional ethnography. As used here, work simply refers to ‘what people do that requires some effort, that they mean to do, and that involves some acquired competence’ (Smith, 1987, p. 165). It is not attached to doing labour work as we usually think of it[[1]](#footnote-1). In this sense, migrants’ overall experiences, thoughts, intentions, and the practical efforts they undertake in the work inclusion process, are considered. The value of the notion of ‘work’ lies in directing analytical attention to the practical activities of everyday life making visible how these activities ‘gear into, are called out by, shape and are shaped translocally’ (McCoy, 2006, p. 111). This trans-local level refers to how people’s everyday work is coordinated across time and space by the workings of power manifested in discourse, bureaucracy, or institutions (Smith, 2005). Notably, this includes juridical guidelines as well as the public debate and mass media. IE studies therefore often use the term ‘mapping’, indicating a need to trace how the individual experiences are coordinated translocally. The mutual relationship between individual experiences and the trans-local level is termed ‘ruling relations’ and refers to the objectified forms of consciousness and organisation, which are constituted externally to particular people and places, creating and relying on textually based realities (Smith, 2005, p. 227).

Texts play a vital role in investigating ruling relations, as texts are key in coordinating and regulating people’s doings in institutional settings (Murray, 2022). According to Smith (1990), texts ‘speak’ in the way they replicate an objectified world-in-common and thus become an essential coordinator of activities, decisions, policies, and classes produced by actual subjects (Smith, 1999, 50-52). Texts thus carry institutional guidelines and expectations over times and places. In the following analysis, we regard the texts and documents regulating migrant policies as explicating the voice of the government on this topic. This is of course a simplified understanding of governance, as we are aware of the discrepancy between documents and how the text is being incorporated and enacted by frontline workers, due to their discretional practices (Stray & Thomassen, 2023).

Taking the standpoint of the individual migrant while at the same time paying attention to guiding texts ensures we as researchers do not risk being drowned in subjective experiences, but ‘keep the institution in view’ (McCoy, 2006). Upholding the institutional gaze, by unpacking how these subjective experiences are formed and embodied, and at the same time working back at the institutions, provides us with knowledge that can be useful for other populations and other contexts. The aim is to map the institutional processes that might be used to make changes to benefit the subjects of ruling regimes (McCoy, 2006, p. 43).

# Research context

The migrant population in Norway amounts to nearly 17% of the total population of approximately 5 million people (Norwegian Statistics, 2024). After 2015 facing the Syrian refugee crisis, the number of migrants residing in Norway has decreased due to policy restrictions. Due to the war in Ukraine, these numbers are on the rise again, yet modestly compared to other Western countries.

The paper departs from a Scandinavian welfare context, typical for a social-democratic or universalistic regime according to Esping-Andersen (1990)'s contemporary welfare state typology. A central characteristic is the de-commodification of labour, implying that basic social services are provided by the state as rights for citizens, independent of their economic position. Norway is regarded as a typical example of this category, depicted as a generous welfare state with a high level of social security for its citizens. This generosity is funded through a relatively high degree of taxes, implying that a high proportion of the population must take part in the labour market. The work inclusion of migrants is thus considered pivotal to upholding the sustainability of the system and can be found in mandatory programmes and conditional activities to receive benefits and support from the state. However, the contexts of welfare states are undergoing major changes due to new forms of governance (e.g., an increase in network organisations/collaboration between public sector organisations and private and NGO stakeholders) which challenge this initial classification. One aspect of these changes relates to ‘the active turn’ of welfare policies (Lødemel & Trickey, 2000; van Berkel et al., 2017). This development increasingly introduces a conditional approach for citizens to become eligible for services and includes incorporating ‘conditions of conduct’ in institutional guidelines (Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018: 18–19). For migrants’, this means that getting support from the state is conditional upon behaving in specific ways or performing compulsory activities. Vike (2018) argues that this turn may represent a shift of the universal Nordic welfare state to a more liberal, incentive-strengthening regime. Previous Nordic research has also identified a dominant and implicit moral work orientation emphasising the duty to become a part of the labour force and pay taxes, as a general approach to work and as a criterion for achieving status as ‘normal’ (Diedrich et al., 2011). Based on the Norwegian context, McKowen (2020) refers to this type of morality as an ‘employment ethic’, distinguishing it from the well-known Protestant work ethic, found during his fieldwork among unemployed people taking part in various work inclusion programmes. The employment ethic highlights the commitment to work or taking part in work-related activities as a widespread societal discourse. The employment ethic also illuminates how the moral aspects of employment include immanent interpretations of how failing to take part in the labour force is understood as a problem of character and lacking the will to join the community of solidarity (Stenius, 1997, p. 124).

Despite that Norway is facing a relatively modest migration population compared to other countries, governments’ activation strategies are shared cross-nationally as part of an increasing ‘welfare to work’, or workfare politics across Western welfare states (van Berkel et al., 2017). Thus, we argue that our findings may resonate beyond the Nordic context.

## Mandatory introductory measures

The inclusion of migrants in Norway is based on the and since the law was first introduced in 2004, it has been enacted in the mandatory Introduction Program(IP). The purpose of the IP is to ‘enhance the opportunities of groups of new arrivals in Norway in rapidly finding work or enter education or training’ (The Integration Regulation, 2021). The target group for the IP are migrants aged 18-55 residing in Norway on various residence permits, including refugees and family reunifications. People coming for work (on work permits) and people from the Nordic or EEA (European Economic Area)- countries, are not included (The Introduction Act, 2021). Those who take part in the introduction programme are entitled to an introduction grant.

The Introduction Act (2021) states that many new arrivals residing in Norwegian municipalities lack basic qualifications. Therefore, they have a mutual right and obligation to take part in the IP. If migrants do not take part or are absent for non-acceptable reasons, they may lose benefits (The Integration Regulation, 2021, § 5). The guidelines are developed by the Public Employment Services (PES), but local authorities in the municipalities are responsible for the implementation of the programme. The IP includes modules/courses in learning the Norwegian language, social studies, life skills (‘Coping with daily life in a new country’) and an element of work or educational activities. Migrants who have children under the age of 18 are obliged to participate in parental guidance. While the Introduction Act provide detailed specifications on the educational elements, regulations on the mandatory work activity are found lacking, probably due to the local implementation. The program aims to be individually tailored and can last between four months and four years depending on the migrants’ needs, age, educational level, and career prospects. The migrant and the local municipal authorities collaboratively set up a contract defining these goals. Previous research on the implementation of the IP finds that the IP measures remain largely unaffected by evaluations that show that such measures tend to have very modest effects on the labour market integration of refugees. Concurrently, incremental changes in the disciplining elements of the programme have resulted in an increasingly controlling activation regime (Djuve & Kavli, 2019). The Integration Act was reformed in 2021, aiming to introduce a more flexible and individual tailoring of the programme.

# Research design and methods

Data collection followed a multifaceted strategy inspired by Institutional Ethnography (Campbell, 2006; Murray et al., 2023; Smith, 2006), including individual interviews, a focus group interview, and observations of different activities and events (Table 1). We pay specific attention to the texts that regulate the legal field of this topic, as they have an impact on the practice and are a way of doing governance.

Table 1. Overview of the preliminary data material used in the study.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Data material** | **Method** | **Nature and purpose** | **Duration/Amount** |
| Documents | Document study | Reviewing the legal jurisdiction and guidelines framing Norwegian migration policies | Covering various texts between the period of 2004 to the reformation of policies in 2021. |
| Transcripts of interviews | Individual interviews | Semi-structured interviews with a focus on migrants’ ‘work’ | 15 interviews, average length of 1 hour per interview. |
| Transcripts of interviews | Focus group interview | Facilitating informants with basic language skills | 1 interview with four informants, approximately 1 hour. |
| Field notes | Observation | WIP activities tailored for migrants | 10 |
| Field notes | Participant Observation | WIP events are tailored for employers and PES. | 5 |
| Reports | Organising multistakeholder seminars (by the research project) | Gathering stakeholders, including migrants, PES staff, people from NGOs and the volunteer sector for sharing common experiences and advice on the research project. | 2 seminars in 2022 and 2023, both lasting one day. |

This paper is part of a research project (Migrant Work Inclusion) funded by the Norwegian Research Council, studying migrant work inclusion programs (WIP) in Norwegian municipalities. The WIPs are differently organised, however PES is a main stakeholder in all of them. We initially contacted key informants in the WIPs for informants to this study. We explicitly asked for a variety of informants in the sense of people who had successfully found work through the WIPs, as well as those experiencing a precarious job situation or being unemployed. We acknowledge that there is a possibility that the sample they suggested was due to ‘survivor bias’ (Kint et al., 2023) i.e., that the informants did not suggest migrants who had suffered more than the average, for the sake of appearing as successful WIP. To adjust for this, we also utilised the ‘snowball method’ (Patton, 1990) asking people whom we met accidentally at the various WIP events if they would participate. Some of these gave us further suggestions of others we could contact. An inclusion criterion for our study was a sufficient level of Norwegian or English.

The interviews were conducted in either Norwegian or English, due to the migrants' preferences. Consequently, migrants who would need a translation service were not included in the study. However, we tried to adjust for this by arranging a focus group interview with four African women with basic Norwegian language skills, as they felt more comfortable talking to us in a group. Informants included are given fictive names, and their country of origin is referred to in regions, to protect their anonymity (Table 2).

Table 2. Overview of informants in the study.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Age** | **Gender** | **Region of origin** | **Reason for migration** | **Year of arrival** | **Education\*** | **Current employment status** |
| Ana | 24 | woman | Eastern-Europe | Refugee | 2022 | Master’s degree | Employed with wage subsidies from NAV/PES |
| Azar | 52 | man | Middle East | Refugee | 2002 | No | Employed with wage subsidies from NAV/PES |
| Daniel | 41 | man | South America | Work permit | 2010 | Master’s degree | Employed |
| Diana | 55 | woman | Asia | Work permit | 1999 | Bachelor | Employed |
| Hanah | 39 | woman | Asia | Refugee | 2019 | Master’s degree | Employed |
| Hami | 60 | woman | Middle East | Family reunification permit | 1991 | Master’s degree | Employed |
| Ilsa | 48 | woman | Europe | Work permit | 2021 | PhD | Precarious work |
| Lilac | 45 | woman | Africa | Refugee | 2015 | No | Unemployed |
| Joana | 48 | woman | Africa | Refugee | 2014 | No | Unemployed |
| Miriam | 51 | woman | Africa | Refugee | 2011 | No | Unemployed |
| Marjeti | 43 | woman | Central America | Work permit | 2018 | No | Precarious work |
| Muhammed | 38 | man | Middle East | Refugee | 2002 | No | Employed with wage subsidies from NAV |
| Nimah | 49 | woman | Africa | Refugee | 2003 | No | Unemployed |
| Ngiro | 44 | woman | Africa | Work permit | 2019 | Master’s degree | Precarious work |
| Rafiq | 46 | man | South Asia | Refugee | 2001 | Student | Receiving health benefits from NAV/PES |
| Shinto | 35 | man | South Asia | Refugee | 2022 | No | Unemployed |
| Yanni | 30 | woman | Asia | Family reunification permit | 2020 | Bachelor | Precarious work |

\*- No education includes elementary school, but also informants who report being analphabetic.

In the interview process, we followed a semi-structured interview guide. Influenced by previous research and the aim of our project, this included topics regarding their personal story behind residing in Norway, previous education, and current job status. We specifically asked about their experiences with work inclusion processes, covering their meetings with the Norwegian Public Employment Services (PES), participation in various support programs (including WIPs) and measures, recruitment processes and career prospects. Questions about experiences with racism and discrimination were also included. Due to the Institutional Ethnographic approach, we used open-ended questions, inviting the informants to reflect on their ‘work’ related to the issues that came up during the interview. We also participated in various events, organised by the WIPs. These events focused on upskilling the migrants in the recruitment process, as well as promoting migrants as valuable labour resources towards employers through focusing on the overall benefits of an equal, diverse and inclusive workplace. The research project also organised yearly seminars.

## Analytical strategies

According to an Institutional Ethnographic approach, analytical rigour does not derive from techniques, such as sampling and thematic analysis, but from the corrigibility of the developing map of social relations (Smith, 2006, p. 33). However, to manage the multifaceted dataset, Nvivo was used in an initial phase to get an overview of the complex empirical material. First, the interviews were read thoroughly and thematically categorised, grouping informants’ experiences regarding the main issues or topics that the informants were concerned with. The same process was conducted with the researchers’ field notes from the WIP events, including reviewing posts on the WIP's social media platforms. During the entire analysis process, documents framing migrant inclusion policies were read and discussed in the research projects’ regular team meetings.

The initial structuring of the data material signalled the study’s problematic, which is the researchers’ interpretation of the larger field or thematic issue that the informants talk about and thus guide the further investigation (Smith, 1987, 2006). A problematic is not necessarily acknowledged by the informants, however, there is an aim for the researcher to bring this insight back to them, to be able to encourage change. As we depart from the migrants’ subjective experiences, our data material naturally includes various perspectives, as some have opposite or other experiences. It is also worth noting that migrants – as for the majority population, are not a homogenous group although they share the status of being new residents in a host country.

# Empirical data and analysis

In this study, we set out to explore migrants’ experiences of their work inclusion process. The initial ‘mapping’ of the empirical data revealed that the study’s overall problematic was related to time, and more specifically how time was seen and valued as a resource in the inclusion process. In the following section, we outline how we departed from this problematic to the analysis of the various understanding of time and its implications.

We found that there was a disjuncture between the migrants’ subjective experiences with time, and how time was understood and enacted according to the institutional guidelines. By disjuncture, we refer to that there was a difference between how migrants viewed the trajectory of being included in the host-country’s labour market, and the resources deemed necessary to reach this goal, and how the institutional guidelines prescribed or enacted the same process. These views were largely summed up in two aspects of the understanding of time. First, we address *time as a resource* in the migrants’ work inclusion process, and second, we address time as *a controlling device* in the inclusion process.

## Time as a resource

The institutional documents regulating migrant work inclusion reveal an economically motivated goal for migrants’ inclusion, by signalling that taking part in the labour market is a resource of independence. The juridical guidelines state that the purpose of the law is to:

‘(…)ensure that immigrants are rapidly integrated into Norwegian society and become economically self-sufficient. The law aims to contribute to immigrants acquiring good Norwegian language skills, knowledge of Norwegian societal life, formal qualifications, and a durable attachment to the labour market’ (Integration Act, 2021)

The work inclusion support programs and measures mirror these guidelines in the sense that they are designed to mutually balance migrants’ rights and duties to take part in them. Migrants’ experiences however reveal that these incentives are not experienced as equally balanced in practice. Several informants report that they experience a disjuncture between their subjective experiences of progress regarding work inclusion, and the institutional guidelines. A joint experience was that this was a process that took more time and effort than the institutional guidelines prescribed and allowed them. Notably, time was seen as a scarce resource. Learning the Norwegian language was frequently stated as an example of such a resource-demanding skill. According to the migrants, learning the Norwegian language was a necessary skill to be able to apply for, and obtain work. This is also found in recruitment requirements (from especially public employers), including a Norwegian level B2[[2]](#footnote-2) to qualify for working for example as a user-controlled personal assistant or nurse. Learning Norwegian as a new language with little prevalence takes time and effort – in addition to everything else you are supposed to manage, our informants told us. For several of them, this experience was related to juggling the role of a jobseeker and worker besides other roles, such as being a parent. Ilsa, working as a postdoc at a university, told us that she was motivated to learn the new language, but practising routinely was difficult, as she mostly spoke English at work and her native language with her children at home. When questioned why she didn’t practice more at home (as she told us her children spoke Norwegian very well), she expressed that at home she was first and foremost a mother. When her children experienced difficulties at school or with friends etc., they desired to speak to her in their native language, as neither she nor her children were able to express complex and difficult emotions in a foreign language. Thus, finding arenas to practice achieving the required language level was not easy, she said, and addressed this barrier as the main reason why she struggled to find a permanent job. Shinto, a 35-year-old refugee from the Middle East talk about how taking care of his five children after his wife died took most of his time, both practically and emotionally. Finding time and energy to attend the mandatory language course and at the same time apply for work, was difficult. He disappointedly experienced that speaking English at a good level, or other languages did not improve his work opportunities, as Norwegian was the required language amongst the employers. From another perspective, Hami educated as a bilingual teacher after arriving in Norway, told us how frustrated she was by her Norwegian colleagues being critical of migrants’ lack of efforts in learning the Norwegian language. This criticism was often directed towards the parents, not being able to support their children in school.

[Language] is the key to everything. Can open all doors. Completely agree. But, and there is a ‘but’: When people come from war, from misery, from seeing your family being murdered, your family being killed in front of your eyes. All that they carry, the heavy baggage they come with, their thoughts are full of memories. (…). And here's the thing: As soon as they arrive, they must go to school. I get annoyed with the Norwegian teachers. [They say:] 'They don't learn quickly, and they don't learn’. (…) Have you thought about what they have experienced? Have you thought about what they have seen? And what do they have in their heads? (Hami, female, 60 years)

Hami’s statement points to another factor that many migrants talk about – struggling with health issues making the capacity for learning new skills more difficult. Rafiq, fleeing from his home country for religious reasons, tells a story of severe physical health issues, but also suffering from traumas after being tortured while imprisoned in his home country. He talks about struggling with anxiety and needs to take breaks during the interview to cope with the bodily reactions when talking about it. Applying for work when suffering from these health issues in general slows his progress, he explains. However, migrants do not suggest unlimited time as a universal resource or prescription for solving their inclusion struggles. Two of the informants worked with supporting other migrants on work inclusion and welfare issues and spoke about how they use their legitimacy of being migrants themselves. They explain how they try to transfer their experiences to other migrants, as both report having experienced how too much time (and support) can also have negative effects. Hanah talks about how she and her husband established some limits for themselves, in how long they could receive benefits before they would start ‘paying back to society’, as she puts it. She experiences that other migrants do not necessarily share her views.

Because it's easier. (…) They know it will continue. They can just take money from the state or NAV [PES]. (…) Because it's easier, actually. (…) Not doing anything. They can just take, and live. But they cannot become included, I think. [For] people, it's very important to give back (Hanah, female, 39).

Hannah's statement touches upon how generous welfare conditions may also have negative effects – an issue that several of the informants talked about. Despite being grateful for the generous support due to an extensive social security net, informants speak of how the lack of mutual demands. Some share experiences from meetings with fellow migrants, advising them not to obtain work, but to stay home because they will receive benefits anyway. Ngiro tells how she was advised by a fellow migrant woman to just have a baby, as a solution for not working and be able to just stay at home. And when the benefits ran out, she could have another baby, she was advised. This led to reflections on the sustainability of the welfare state, which Ngiro elaborate on:

I did know that this country is rich, but why give, give, give? And this will create a culture of people just like, I don't need to work. If I work – [I pay] how many, 30, 40% tax? If I stay home, I get the same amount of money as when I work (Ngiro, female, 44).

Spending time, money and effort on practical issues required for obtaining work, were also considered an underlying factor for getting work. Obtaining a driving license, for instance, was a recurring issue among our informants, especially for those with less education and formal competencies. Norway is a rural country, and many migrants are settled in areas with less developed public transport services. Holding a driver’s license can be a necessity to go to work, and in a lot of unskilled work, i.e. within transportation services or private care services, a driver’s license is a requirement in the recruitment process. Many of our informants talked about how having support for obtaining a driver’s license would have opened a whole range of job opportunities, but requests for economic support were in general turned down by the Public Employment Service (PES).

Daniel, a migrant from Latin America working for PES with supporting other migrants into work, told us that he often contemplated if it would be more strategic of PES to support one member of a family to obtain a driver’s licence than leaving the whole family to apply for social benefits for years. He says: ‘It doesn’t make sense. Cause’ it also makes people lose their confidence, and when you lose confidence, it's very difficult because you end up in a vicious cycle, and it's hard to get out of there’. The same issue was addressed by Ngiro, who told us that after she had got her request for a driver’s license turned down, rhetorically asked her PES caseworker: ‘So, you want me to just get 10,000 kroner [900 Euro] a month? You want me to just sit and wait?’

These statements reveal that time is found as a vital resource in the inclusion process, but for multiple reasons. According to the migrants, obtaining a job hinges on several factors that take time and effort. Migrants’ time resources must be shared between multiple roles and inclusion barriers. Meeting the institutional expectations also depends on having access to resources that the support programs can’t provide, such as transportation. Time is thus overall found as a scarce resource in the inclusion process from the migrants’ point of view, deviating from the institutional goal of rapid integration.

## Time as a controlling device

Migrants in our study report ambiguous experiences on their career prospects. On the one hand, most of them find undertaking low-skilled and precarious work natural when entering a new country. A common experience among them appears to be that everyone must accept starting from somewhere, focusing on learning the language and social and cultural norms. On the other hand, some find that undertaking precarious work through institutional support programs delays their work inclusion process or has negative effects. Ana, a Ukrainian woman holding a master’s degree in law, explains that although currently working as a barista does not match her career prospects, it helps her to socialize and learn the language more rapidly. However, she experiences that some employers profit from offering refugees precarious language training agreements or work supported by wage subsidies from PES. Her current employer has several refugees on precarious contracts and recently told her that when the money from PES expires, there will presumably be no more work for her in the company. She got this job after an initial period of language training but is aware that PES now refund her employer 60% of her wage. Thus, she suspects that her employer will exchange her and her colleagues on these precarious contracts with a new group of refugees on language training agreements. When asked if she has told her PES caseworker about it, she says no, but indicates that PES probably already know. Although she is grateful for PES arranging this opportunity as part of her IP, she would rather spend time finding a regular job, she says.

In personal meetings with PES caseworkers, the migrants experience how the institutional guidelines are enacted. Ngiro talks about her first meeting with the PES, telling the caseworker that she wants to start her own company, whereas the caseworker repeatedly encourages her to apply for work in healthcare services.

“And when I met [PES], he is like; ‘What job are you looking for?’ I'm like; NGOs - I speak seven languages. The guy's like; Have you considered “sykehjem” [nursing home]? Considered cleaning? I'm like, no.”

She explains that just having a job, is not satisfying. She desires a job she can return to home from and be proud of, feeling that she has contributed and being part of society. The feeling of being trapped yet occurs when she realizes that she is not encouraged to fulfil these goals, as getting a low-skilled job is signalled as the end means of the inclusion process.

The stories of Ana and Ngiro, representing highly skilled migrants, reveal that the enactment of guidelines holding a short-term view, is describing a lack of individually tailored opportunities and found controlling their career prospects. Also, low-skilled migrants reported feelings of being controlled and monitored. One aspect of this was that receiving benefits included being dependent on the state and came with a mutual expectation that the state could also control you. Miriam, an illiterate refugee from Africa with basic Norwegian language skills, told us that:

Now I am not in control of myself. NAV [The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Services/PES) has control over me. When I do not work, I am not in control of myself. When I do not work, NAV is in control of me.

Contact with immigration authorities was experienced as a more explicit and direct form of control, especially related to rejection of permit applications and waiting for response on appeal cases. ‘Being in a state of limbo’, Azar described how he felt stuck, including a feeling of being suspended or unable to progress having his application for political asylum continually rejected for twenty years. He recently got a temporary residence permit and has found work through a WIP but tells a story of having to take on clandestine work in the waiting period. He tells a story of being harshly exploited by several employers and working long hours for a symbolic amount of money. He also talks about how he was recurrently imprisoned by the police and threatened to be sent back to his home country. During this period, he didn’t have a place to stay and lacked access to fundamental healthcare services. He is visually marked when talking about this period in his life and starts crying when questioned about how the state of unpredictability had affected him. Not being able to plan more than a day for years has left him with a feeling of lacking control of his situation in general.

The above statements touch upon the issue of time used as a device in migrants’ work inclusion processes. Waiting appears to be a common experience, though precarious work can open the door to further employment, many agree. Several of our informants though revealed that the repeated experience of being undervalued had an impact on their self-confidence. Some reported that after a while they gave up, as the burden of being rejected was not only frustrating but also humiliating. We ascribe these experiences to the institutional guidelines being set on a short-term default, including encouraging migrants to undertake any kind of work activity or contract. Their previous competencies, preferences, and goals for the future were thus often downplayed. In this sense, migrants experience that time is used as a controlling device in structuring their work inclusion process from a short-term perspective. This approach deviates from their subjective standpoint, characterised by a more long-term approach to becoming a full citizen.

# Discussion

This difference in how subjective and objective time is experienced is well-known from previous research (Hernes, 2022; Shipp & Jansen etc.). However, our study revealed that the subjective/individual experiences and the institutional guidelines are ‘hooked’ into each other, in a more comprehensive way. From both the individual and the institutional perspective, time is not only revealed in a comprehension of the past, present and future, or divided into subjective and objective time trajectories. Time is also found as an inevitable resource and a controlling device in the inclusion process, although with various implications according to different standpoints. Shifting the perspective from how time is viewed traditionally, in the sense of a time trajectory, to time as a resource (Hernes, 2022) in the inclusion process, can therefore open for also exploring the ruling relations of migration policies.

## The disjuncture between an individual, multiple and ongoing view of time compared to institutional streamlining of time in organisations

The analysis reveals that an overweight of the informants was concerned about the disjuncture between their subjective experiences of the work inclusion process, differing from the institutional view, which they found streamlined into rapidly entering the labour market. According to the informants’ experiences, this view was found one-dimensional, not revealing the true nature of the multiple ‘work’ deemed necessary to fulfil this goal. We found that migrants’ time had to be shared between multiple activities, such as learning a new language, taking care of their families and especially their children’s well-being, and practical issues – besides finding work. Previous research also reveals that migrants suffer from more severe health issues, poorer housing conditions and discrimination in recruitment processes (Risberg & Romani, 2022). The complexity of these issues and the ‘work’ spent on coping with them, was experienced as downplayed or excluded from the migrants’ meetings with the PES and in institutional guidelines. We thus argue that the individual and the institutional view of time trajectories in the work inclusion process reveals a mismatch. From the migrant point of view, work inclusion is experienced as a part of their overall inclusion into the host society. Our informants talked about inclusion in a holistic approach as experiences related to a wide range of civic society. Working though appears as a central element of this process, found in prospects and desires of finding a job that matches their competencies and eventually being able to contribute to society. Being included in the labour market thus appears to be an essential part of the identity-making of becoming a new citizen. However, from the migrants’ point of view, work was only one part of becoming a full citizen in the new country, and this process also went on after they had succeeded in finding a job. Conversely, in the institutional view (as found in documents and guidelines for work inclusion programs) work is seen both as a means to inclusion and as the end goal.

## The ruling relations of the (Norwegian) ‘employment ethic’

Turning attention to how time is viewed as a resource, including as a controlling device, may contribute to an understanding of the ruling relations of (Norwegian) migration policies as an underlying premise. These ruling relations are found in how institutional discourses coordinate the subjective experiences of governance, but simultaneously shape policies, as people enact according to the contemporary discourse (Smith, 2006). As institutional texts are vested in trans-local relations and characterised by a taken-for-grantedness (Smith, 1999, p. 50), unpacking or taking the discursive context of the host society into account, is essential. By including this translocally perspective, we specifically highlight the relevance of standpoint, more specifically from which standpoint the institutional guidelines are developed. We argue that migration policies and institutional guidelines for migrants’ work inclusion are formed from an objective standpoint. This standpoint includes having a presumably universal or standardized subjective in mind. However, due to current activation policies and the previously described strong ‘employment ethic’ (McKowen, 2020), the Norwegian discourse is based on labour market participation as the standard or ‘normal’ role for citizens to apply. Consequently, the institutional guidelines for migrants’ work inclusion are based on an assumed subject holding a strong ‘employment ethic’, presented as a supposedly neutral, universal standard process. Our informants’ meetings with expectations to undertake any kind of work or work activity, although not aligned with their previous competencies, skills, or career prospects migrant, may serve as an example of this embedded ethic. The guidelines prescribed for migrants’ successful work inclusion thus objectify migrants’ lived experiences as they depart from a presumably universal and taken-for-granted standpoint. The ruling relations of the ‘employment ethic’ thus work as an overall device or governing strategy for migrants’ work inclusion. Consequently, this ‘the institutional gaze’ (McCoy, 2006) of the migrant population entails seeing migrants first and foremost as labour resources, due to an increasing activation policy and governance. This finding may even include questioning if the enactment of migrant work inclusion processes represents a shift by introducing a recommodification of labour, challenging the initial decommodification characteristic of the Scandinavian universal welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

# Conclusion and implications for further research

This paper challenges the traditional view of subjective versus measured and objective time related to migrant inclusion and also explores how time can be viewed as a resource for different social actors and purposes (Hernes, 2022). Based on our study, we assert that there is an immanent twofold disjuncture related to this. First, the work inclusion process is viewed differently from a subjective and institutional point of view regarding time trajectory. From an institutional point of view, the inclusion process is found one-dimensional and linear, with labour as a means to an end. Consequently, institutional guidelines are set on a short-term default, revealed in measures to include migrants in the labour force as soon as possible. From the migrants’ point of view, inclusion into the host society is viewed as an ongoing, multiple and non-linear process, where labour is only one part of the challenges and barriers they must overcome to become citizens of full value. Thus, migrants reveal a wider inclusion perspective, indicating that the notion of ‘work inclusion’ may even entail an inappropriate label as migrants did not seem to separate work inclusion from their overall societal and civic inclusion. Second, we find that time viewed as a resource differs according to the subjective and the institutional standpoint. Migrants’ experiences reveal a lack of (time) resources deemed necessary for their inclusion process, while the institutional guidelines enact time as a device for monitoring and controlling migrants’ access to support. Thus, we argue that approaching time as differently constructed by various social actors, may contribute to an understanding of why migration policies fail - both from an individual and an institutional point of view.

Raising the awareness of the ruling relations of ‘the employment ethic’ migration policies allows us to eventually highlight some potential implications for further research and policymaking. Institutional guidelines are streamlined, interpreted, and conducted aiming to provide standardization, whereas migrants' experiences call for individual adjustments, not being treated as members of a target group. Based on our study, further research would benefit from exploring how migrant work inclusion policies might benefit from including the migrant standpoint to a larger extent. A part of this is paying attention to the structural and practical barriers to work inclusion, such as developing adequate and tailored language courses, and support for transportation, childcare and housing. These issues cannot be overlooked and separated from the work inclusion process, as migrants report them as conditions for work inclusion. In general, this calls for developing migrant inclusion programs to be more responsive to the actual experiences of migrants targeted by these programs.

Theoretically, by addressing the construction of time from various standpoints, this paper contributes to the under-addressed issue of time in organization studies, more specifically the disjuncture of how time is viewed from a citizen and an institutional perspective. Within the field of work inclusion in general, this approach can be fruitful for studies of people standing outside the labour market for various reasons. We propose that this perspective can be transferred to other institutions and organisations in raising awareness of equality, diversity, and inclusion in general.

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1. In the further paper we use ‘work’ to highlight this notion, to separate it from our writings about work in the traditional meaning of doing labour. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. At level B2, the participant can understand complex language and express themselves objectively, clearly, and nuanced about a wide range of general topics as well as topics within their field of study and personal interests The Integration Regulation. (2021). *Regulation to the Integration Act*. The Norwegian Labour and Inclusion Department Retrieved from https://lovdata.no/dokument/SF/forskrift/2020-12-15-2912 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)