Parenting Experiences of Syrian Refugee Mothers in Belgium

Two Year Master Thesis

Ellemieke Deen

Interventions in Childhood
Social Sciences and Welfare

Supervisor:
Pia Bülow

Examiner:
Mats Granlund

Spring Semester 2018
Currently, there are record breaking numbers of refugees worldwide in which the Syrian ethnicity is the most represented. The Child Right’s Convention states that refugee children have the right for protection and humanitarian assistance. This Convention was signed by 192 countries including Belgium. Refugee parents could experience several difficulties while settling down in a new country and this could affect their capacity to parent their children. The parent’s capacity to parent their children directly affects the lifelong outcomes of the child. Thus, it is important for professionals to understand the experiences of refugee parents in order to understand how to help them in helping the children. Gender appears to have an effect on the integration process. Therefore, this empirical study investigates Syrian refugee mothers’ experiences of parenting children in Belgium. The study analyzed the interviews of 7 participants with a phenomenological perspective and narrative theory. In the analysis there were three themes identified in the experiences of parenting for Syrian mothers; challenges, differences and strategies. The themes are discussed in relation to parenting. In a second analysis the themes were situated in a time frame of past, present and future. This analysis considers the mothers’ experiences through past experiences, perceptions of the present and future expectations. In conclusion, experiences of Syrian refugee mothers could influence the parenting process, their perceptions of being a mother and the outcome of the child.

Keywords: Parenting, experiences, Syrian, refugee, Belgium
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ...................................................................................................................... 1

BACKGROUND ........................................................................................................................ 1

What is a refugee? .................................................................................................................. 1

What are human rights? .......................................................................................................... 1

How is Belgium involved in all this? ..................................................................................... 2

What is the Convention on the Rights of the Child? .............................................................. 2

What is parenting? .................................................................................................................. 2

What influences the process of parenting? ............................................................................. 3

Previous research on parenting for refugees ........................................................................... 3

The research gap about refugee parents.................................................................................. 4

The theoretical framework of this study................................................................................. 5

Rationale ................................................................................................................................. 6

AIM ............................................................................................................................................ 6

METHOD ................................................................................................................................... 7

Design ..................................................................................................................................... 7

Trustworthiness ....................................................................................................................... 7

Sample selection ...................................................................................................................... 8

Data collection ......................................................................................................................... 9

Data analysis ........................................................................................................................... 10

Ethical considerations ........................................................................................................... 11

FINDINGS ............................................................................................................................... 14

List of themes ......................................................................................................................... 14

Textural description ............................................................................................................... 15

Structural description ............................................................................................................. 25

DISCUSSION .......................................................................................................................... 28

Experiences of Syrian mothers ............................................................................................. 28

Time in relation to experiences of Syrian mothers ............................................................... 30

Methodology .......................................................................................................................... 32

Future research and clinical implications ............................................................................. 34

CONCLUSION ......................................................................................................................... 35

REFERENCES ......................................................................................................................... 36

APPENDIXES ......................................................................................................................... 44

Appendix A: Overview of Participant Criteria ..................................................................... 44
Appendix B: Selection Criteria ............................................................................................. 45
Appendix C: Draft Informed Consent .................................................................................. 46
Appendix D: Interview Questions ....................................................................................... 48
Appendix E: Procedure ......................................................................................................... 49
INTRODUCTION

The interest of this study is to explore the perspectives of Syrian refugees for parenting in a host country. The current large forced displacement of refugees has been referred to as a global crisis with the highest number of humanitarian needs since the Second World War (United Nations, 2017). In 2017 Syrians are the most represented nationality of refugees worldwide (UNHCR, 2017). An estimated 11 million Syrian refugees have fled the country since the civil war started in 2011 and more than 800,000 Syrian asylum applications were recorded in Europe between 2011 and 2015 (Syrian Refugees, 2016; Roblain, Malki, Azzi, & Licata, 2017). Many of them are families that need to rebuild their home in a new country (Mercycorps, 2018). Despite these record-breaking numbers of forced displacement, little research has been done with input from refugees (Ochocka & Janzen, 2008).

BACKGROUND

What is a refugee?

According to the UNHCR (2016) a refugee can be defined as a person fleeing armed conflict or persecution. Refugees may encounter new challenges in the new country of residence due to the loss of a support system and new gender role expectations (Bellinger, 2013). They might struggle to integrate in the community due to barriers such as low socioeconomic status, limited resources, poor language skills, discrimination, educational and employment barriers, and unfamiliarity with services in the community (Ahn, McInnis, Miller, Wang, & Laszloffy, 2013; Stewart et al., 2015). In addition, refugees might struggle for a prolonged period of time now that coping skills that helped in their previous country might not solve problems in the new country of residence (Ahn et al., 2013). UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon stated that human rights and humanitarian law should guide us forward in the assistance of refugees (United Nations, 2017).

What are human rights?

Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings regardless of nationality or ethnic origin, place of residence, color, sex, religion, or language (OHCHR, 2017). The United Nations has gradually expanded human rights to encompass specific standards for women, children, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, by developing declarations such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, n.d.).


How is Belgium involved in all this?

In 2015 alone Belgium received requests for asylum by 35,476 refugees (CGVS, 2016) and in August of 2017 the top three countries of origin were Syria (24.6%), Afghanistan (6.5%) and Palestine (6.5%) (CGVS, 2017). Belgium is a country divided in federal, regional and community governments that all have their own responsibilities. Policy regarding the receiving of newcomers is authorized by the communities in Belgium. As there are three communities in Belgium, people in Belgium can receive different types of aids depending on the policy of the community that they are in (Decock et al., 2014). In Flanders for example, newcomers are obligated to take an integration course which includes a Dutch course, information about Belgium, and support by finding a job, education and leisure activities. Brussels Capital Region is in the process of adopting the same policy as Flanders (Integratie-inburgering, n.d.). In Wallonia people immediately receive information about rights and laws in Belgium and they are able but not obligated to take an integration course which includes a language course and social-professional orientation (Belgique-Infos, n.d.).

What's more, is that Belgium is one of the 192 countries that ratified the Children’s Right Convention and the promotion and protection of children’s rights has been one of their priorities (Foreign Affairs, 2016; UNICEF, 2005).

What is the Convention on the Rights of the Child?

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is a declaration of human rights to protect civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights of any child under the age of 18 (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). The Convention states specifically in Article 22 that State Parties are responsible for the appropriate measures to ensure protection and humanitarian assistance for refugee children to enjoy the rights of the Convention. According to Grant and Guerin (2014) parents’ capacity to parent their child directly affects the lifelong outcomes of the child. This could imply that to ensure the right of protection and humanitarian assistance for refugee children, their parents are partly entitled to receive assistance.

What is parenting?

Parenting can be defined as the purposive activities of parents to ensure the survival and development of the child and that promotes the child’s outcome (Hoghughi & Long, 2004). Pachter and Dumont-Mathieu (2004) state that there are three universal goals in parenting; (1) survival (2) attainment of self-sufficiency and (3) learning of cultural values and norms.
Parenting further denotes a process, activity and interaction which is bidirectional, interactive and constantly changing by the parent’s and child’s behavior (Hoghughi & Long, 2004; Ochacka & Janzen, 2008).

**What influences the process of parenting?**

Hoghughi and Long (2004) state that the process of parenting is influenced by concerns and worries, prerequisites and necessities. Other studies have demonstrated that certain individual factors, such as characteristics (e.g. temperament), moods and stress affect the parenting process as well as contextual factors of parents and children, such as their relationships and family bonds affect the parenting process (Aring & Renk, 2010; Conley, Caldwell, Flynn, Dupre, & Rudolph, 2004; Kershaw et al., 2014; White, Roosa, Weaver, & Nair, 2009). These influences can directly affect parenting practices or indirectly affect the interaction of the parent and the child. For example, the mood of the parent could affect how the parent models behavior which is a direct influence of parenting on the child and it could also affect how the parent responds to the child which could indirectly affect the interaction (Conley et al., 2004). Thus, the interactive process between the parent and the child could be influenced by their individual feelings and by the context. As parents are deliberate in their actions to promote the child’s future outcome, parents have specific future goals to which they are progressing (Hoghughi & Long, 2004). Ochacka and Janzen (2008) explain that the future goals of parenting are influenced by values, beliefs and ideas on how to raise children. Bergnehr (2016) further stresses that parenting practices are not only connected to the future, but also to experiences of the past. For example, as the child grows older, parents could reflect back on past parenting strategies that were effective and combine them with new strategies that seem appropriate to the present situation (Tingvold, Hauff, Allen, & Middelthon, 2012). Moreover, parents tend to preserve the best strategies from their own childhood and from past parenting experiences as an attempt to facilitate harmony in the family while remaining flexible with the demands that they encounter in the present context (Tingvold et al., 2012).

**Previous research on parenting for refugees**

At the start of arrival, refugee families are often not intact until the procedures of reunification are completed (Williams, 2011). Challenges for refugee parents might be that they are unaware of permissible parental strategies in the new culture due to barriers such as
poor language skills, unfamiliarity with services and low economic status (Ahn et al., 2013). Furthermore, differences in interpretation of family values, expectations of child behavior and parenting goals across cultures can give rise to significant challenges (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011; Tingvold et al., 2012). Another strain that is put on parenting is the distance from family and friends (Stewart et al, 2015). Consequently, some families may experience gender role conflicts as extended family is not able to help out and the father has to step in (Stewart et al, 2015). Over time, integration is often marked by change in family structures and daily routines as alternative strategies are adopted (Williams, 2011). As the family integrates they might put a lot of effort to achieve the goals from the dominant culture but fall short due to certain attitudes in the community (Ahn et al., 2013). The difficulty of raising children increases if changes in values and goals are various between parents and their children (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011). Acculturation is often used to refer to the process of changes in the person’s original culture pattern by continuous contact with a group of people from a different culture (Berry, 1997). Renzaho and Vignjevic (2011) claim that children generally acculturate faster, because they learn the new language more rapid and are more frequently engaged in the community which could lead to a poor child-parent relationship. Miranda, Estrada and Firpo-Jimenez (2000) further state that adolescents may have more trouble maintaining traditional cultural values which could lead to family dysfunction. Integration as an ongoing process of change in the family is thus influenced by the parents and by the children. In the integration process common resources could be extended family, language acquisition and cultural continuity (Tingvold et al., 2012).

**The research gap about refugee parents**

Although some researchers have attempted to identify relevant variables for parenting as an immigrant in a new country (Ochocka & Janzen, 2008), there is little research with input from refugee parents themselves, such as their strategies to parent their children while they also manage the interrelated challenges of resettlement in a new country (Grant & Guerin, 2014), and parenting experiences which also shape parenting practices (Ochocka & Janzen, 2008). For example, a study in Australia revealed that the differences in expectations of parenting in a new culture made refugee parents consider returning back to their country of origin or a country with more similar childrearing beliefs (Lewig, Arney, & Salveron, 2010).

In Belgium there has been research done with input from refugees, such as studies with male refugees (Roblain et al., 2017; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006), refugees and asylum
seekers that experienced violence (Keygnaert, Vettenburg, & Temmerman, 2012), unaccompanied refugee mothers (Vervliet, De Mol, Broeckaert, & Derluyn, 2014), and unaccompanied refugee children (Derluyn & Broeckaert, 2008; Derluyn, Mels, & Broeckaert, 2009; Vervliet, Vanobbergen, Broeckaert, & Derluyn, 2015), but no research was found with input from refugee parents.

**The theoretical framework of this study**

The theoretical framework of this study is based on a phenomenological perspective and narrative theory. The phenomenological assumption in narrative analysis is that by lived experience meaning is ascribed to phenomena (Eastmond, 2007). Polkinghorne (1988) claims that a method for a person to make meaning out of experiences is by telling narratives. A narrative could be defined as a sequence of events containing meaning that the speaker has selected as important, organized, connected and evaluated for a particular audience (Riessman, 2008). By narrating experience, a person has the opportunity to negotiate the meaning, evaluate the significance and assess the next step of action (Eastmond, 2007). Research on narratives could serve to understand how the narrator explains what has happened and what that means and how he or she is urged to engage or react as a way to move forward after the experience (Eastmond, 2007). For example, a narrative of a refugee parent could serve to understand how he or she explains what has happened to a child, what this means and how he or she feels urged to engage or react as a way to move forward. Some research suggests that by narrating experiences, a person forms identities by linking himself in a continuous order to the contexts that are experienced. By forming an identity, a person seeks a logical coherence with past experiences and future anticipations (Eastmond, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1988). Polkinghorne (1988) further suggests that meaning making of an experience entails a threefold of perceptions. He states that it includes a present perception of the past, a present perception of the present and a present perception of an expected future. For instance, as an experience in the present is perceived as a change by a refugee parent, the meaning of this change could be derived from past experiences of change and how this parent perceives that this change will affect the future. Analytically, we should thus distinguish between the phenomena that a person encounters in life and the manner in which a person perceives and ascribes meaning to events (Eastmond, 2007). In a phenomenological approach the individual experience is reduced and the general essence is sought (Cresswell, 2007). From a narrative theory perspective,
the meaning of a term that describes an experience can be strikingly different as well as the perceived appropriate reaction to the experience (Eastmond, 2007). For example, as a refugee parent encounters change in his or her life, not all parents perceive the change as a loss or define it as problematic and some parents might perceive that reaction is not needed. These differences could be related to Polkinghorne’s (1988) suggestion that meaning making of experiences occurs in three perceptions of time. In this study, the general essence according to a phenomenological perspective is sought and reviewed with data that corresponds to meaning making by three perceptions of time in narrative theory.

**Rationale**

Researchers stress that to know how we can support and strengthen refugee families, it is important to explore how they raise their children and which challenges they face in parenting (Grant & Guerin, 2014). Some researchers imply that over time their might be significant differences between male and female refugees in the integration process (Chuang & Tamis-LeMonda, 2009; Roblain et al., 2017). This could indicate that experiences of mothers might be quite distinctive from experiences of fathers. Narrations of their experiences could make us understand how mothers describe what has happened to them and how they make meaning of this related to past, present and future perceptions. Tsai, Chen, and Huang (2011) argue that the mother’s experiences not only affect her self-concept, feelings of mastery, and sense of wellbeing but also the children’s health and development. Because experiences can have significant consequences and gender can in turn affect experiences, this study focuses on mothers’ experiences. To fill the research gap about studies with input from refugees, this study examines the experiences of Syrian refugee mothers of parenting children in Belgium.

**AIM**

The aim of this study is to describe what a Syrian refugee mother could experience in relation to parenting, perceived two to four years after arrival in Belgium. To investigate this research topic, the research questions are:

1. How do Syrian refugee mothers experience parenting children since they have arrived in Belgium?
2. How are the experiences of parenting children for Syrian refugee mothers in Belgium related to time; the past, the present and the future?
METHOD

Design

This study was executed with a phenomenological perspective. Phenomenological research attempts to eliminate everything that represents a prejudgment, to perceive knowledge of non-reflective everyday experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The second analysis reviewed the data considering narrative theory. Narrative theory attempts to understand how a person makes sense out of an event into a personal story (Hockey, 2016).

Trustworthiness

Both confirmability and dependability are established by transparency of the research process (Cresswell, 2007; Yin, 2011). The researcher has documented and described all procedures throughout the process and these documents will be stored for two years. Before data collection, a pilot study of the interview was conducted, to test out questions and adjust according to possible difficulties. Cresswell (2007) argues that the personal experience of the researcher could be considered as part of the findings. In this study, the researcher’s own experience has been noted and discussed throughout the study with other researchers. These notes contained a rapport of inferences, interpretations and assumptions of the researcher during the process of collecting and analyzing the data. For credibility, the researcher held critical discussions in which consensus was sought with fellow researchers. In phenomenological research the focus is put on the general essence of the phenomenon (Cresswell, 2007). Sousa (2014) explains that because the researcher identifies meaning structures between participants, the participants cannot provide validity after analysis, because the participant’s viewpoint is not the same as the researcher’s. This was reported along with the findings.

The language barrier in this study has affected the dependability of this study. The researcher needs to depend on the interpreter’s translation and cannot verify if the translation was accurate. Dependability has also been affected due to the translation from Arabic to Dutch and then to English. Translation from one language rarely translates directly to another language creating some error in the findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Due to the researcher’s role in the interaction with the participants, the researcher provides a personal interpretation that may have been different with another researcher (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).
Transferability refers to the need for transferable findings between researcher and those being studied (Cresswell, 2007). To increase transferability, Cresswell (2007) suggests to present descriptions of participants and context to be able to generalize the findings to other groups, settings or time points. To ensure anonymity, some data has been modified by, for example, slightly changing use of words when this does not seem to interfere with the result presented. In phenomenology, the possibility to generalize is not about the sample size, but the variability with which the phenomenon appears in the descriptions (Sousa, 2014) and is discussed in the findings. Additionally, purposive sampling and using extensive quotations in the analysis and presentation of the findings should increase transferability of the study (Mu, 2008).

Several steps could ensure validity in a phenomenological approach. Sousa (2014) explains that internal consistency is achieved by logically connecting questions, sample, data collection and analyses to the methodological approach. Some researchers claim that there is a need for the intentional experience (consciousness of the experience) (Sousa, 2014). The intentional experience is the perceiving, feeling, thinking, remembering or judging of the object that is brought into consciousness (Moustakas, 1994). Furthermore, you could discern between the psychological existence of the experience (describing it as experienced) and the shared essence of the object/phenomenon: (establishing essential characteristics), making a synthesis of identification (the accumulation of the object in transcriptions), and synthesizing the psychological meaning (making themes of the experiences that appear in several transcripts) (Moustakas, 1994; Sousa, 2014). In this study, the researcher perceived the object which is intentionally experienced (perceived, felt, thought about, remembered or judged) to be the mother as the participant explains her experiences from the perspective of being a mother. Validity in this study is attempted by the researcher’s familiarization with phenomenology and clarification of the perspective.

**Sample selection**

The population selected for this study were refugee mothers originally from Syria. Other criteria were the presence of one or several child(ren) who were currently living in Belgium. The number of years present in Belgium had to be at least two years and maximal four years. An overview of the criteria is shown in Appendix A.
In this study one participant was recruited by purposive sampling in The Netherlands, which served as a pilot interview, and six participants were recruited by purposive sampling in Belgium. The pilot participant was initially chosen to serve solely as a measure to detect deficiencies in the method and took place in the Netherlands due to the researcher’s whereabouts. However, in the analysis sufficient commonalities were found and it was decided to include the pilot due to ethical and research benefits. Purposive sampling was done by approaching local organizations that provide services for refugees and asking if they are willing to ask among their clients if there are mothers interested in participating. The organizations were offered study findings in return for their assistance. Selection criteria for participants and data collection can be found in Appendix B.

At the end of 2017 a number of organizations were contacted to ask assistance in finding mothers who were willing to participate. Potential participants that were provided by five professionals from organizations throughout Belgium received an informed consent document in Arabic language electronically or via the organization. A draft of the informed consent document is provided in Appendix C. The participant was contacted at least one week after receiving the document to answer questions, verify willingness to participate and to ask if a translator will be desired during the interview. At this stage, one potential participant refused to participate. This resulted in a sample of 7 participants including the pilot.

The sample entails mothers with children between the age of 10 months to 25 years old. Four mothers had two children and three mothers had four or five children. All mothers were married and all parents and children were reunified in Belgium. Three mothers stated to be Muslim, two mothers stated to be Christian and two mothers stated to be Catholic. Four mothers had a university degree from Syria and six mothers had a job in Syria. They were in Belgium for two years up to three years and two months. The mothers lived in different communities in Belgium. Four out of seven mothers stated in the interview that they planned to stay in the host country, while three mothers stated that they didn’t know if they would stay.

**Data collection**

To answer the research questions, an open in-depth interview was utilized. A full overview of the background questions and themes can be found in Appendix D. The
participants that were willing to participate were asked where the interview should take place and an appointment was set up for February 2018. All participants chose to have the interview at home. At the appointment, if there were no further questions, the participant was asked when he or she would like to sign the document (before or after the interview). Some participants chose to sign it after the interview and some participant signed it immediately. Documents were provided for the participant, interpreter and researcher and the signature was placed on an Arabic, English and Dutch document by all three parties (if the interpreter was present). It was stressed that the participant was able to withdrawal at any point in the research process until data is reported. Three interviews were conducted in Dutch or English and four in Arabic with the presence of an interpreter. The interpreter was a Dutch master student of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Belgium. The researcher and interpreter spoke together in the language that the mother was best skilled in (Dutch or English). In the interview, the researcher formulated a question for the mother, the interpreter stated this in Arabic, the mother answered with a story and the interpreter summarized the story in a couple sentences. The summarized version of the interpreter was written in the transcriptions of the mothers that spoke in Arabic. Transcriptions were written in the original language and were either in Dutch or English. The interview was audio taped and the recordings remain stored on a private computer for two years along with transcriptions of the interviews and will then be destroyed.

**Data analysis**

Throughout the process of collecting data and analysis, the researcher wrote down assumptions and judgements. Moustakas (1994) refers to this as ‘the Epoche’, which is a process in which there is awareness of judgements, inferences and interpretations and every aspect has equal value; no position is taken on the phenomenon. Immediately after every interview the researcher transcribed the interview to ensure that there would be no mix up between interviews. After all interviews had taken place, the researcher searched for commonalities and differences in the interviews by reading the transcripts thoroughly and eventually forming initial codes. The codes were in English or Dutch. For the textural analysis, significant meaning units were developed and grouped in subthemes that were common in the transcripts. The formulated subthemes were written in English. After subthemes were identified, the researcher formed themes in which a number of subthemes seem to coincide. Before discussions about the analysis, the Dutch quotations that were
identified as codes were translated to English by the researcher. As stated before, after
discussion with another researcher, it was decided to include the pilot interview in the
analysis and reporting due to a number of general commonalities with interesting
quotations. For the structural analysis, codes were formed for text that represented past
perceptions, present perceptions and future perceptions and were compared between the
participants. Cresswell (2007) suggests that a phenomenological design reports a list of
themes, a textural description of what happened with verbatim examples, a structural
description of how this happened and a composite description containing how and what. In
this report the analysis is shortened and therefore contains a list of themes, a textural
description and a structural description. An overview of the research procedure is presented
in Appendix E.

Ethical considerations

*Interviews*

In interviews the interaction affects the interviewees and the knowledge produced affects
our understanding of people, which results in ethical issues that need to be considered
(Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Marshall and Rossman (2011) state that respect, justice and
beneficence are moral principles for interview research. Respect stands for privacy,
anonymity, and the right to participate and refuse to participate. Beneficence ensures that
no harm will be done and justice seeks the benefits of the study for the participants (Marshall
& Rossman, 2011). The purpose of the interview should benefit the participating subjects,
the group they represent and humanity (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Therefore, an
assessment was made considering risks and benefits on physical, psychological, social,
economic, legal and dignitary level (Yin, 2011). For this study, knowledge obtained from
this research might help services who work with Syrian refugee parents to better assist and
support the family. For participants, possible psychological risks were stress,
embarrassment, intrusion, a sense of failure or coercion and changes in self-understanding.
Possible psychological benefits were feeling empowered by taking part in research, finding
the experience interesting, increase of confidence, increase of knowledge, and an
opportunity to collect thoughts and develop new ideas about the world (Arksey & Knight,
1999; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). In order to avoid economical and physical hindrance for
the participant, the researcher had travelled to the participant’s location which also
decreased the amount of time they spent on the study. The participant was also free to
choose the day and time. To control for unwanted legal, dignitary and social risks anonymity and confidentiality were secured. Anonymity was secured by coding the participants and by changing personal information. Confidentiality was secured by discussing data solely with fellow researchers and the interpreter. In addition to secure justice, without the participants’ knowledge about this the researcher provided a small gift after the interview took place. If a service was involved in the sampling of participants, it is important to stress that refusal of participation or later withdrawal from the research will not have consequences on the provided services (Darlington & Scott, 2002). Therefore, this was stressed in the informed consent document.

*Informed consent*

Informed consent and confidentiality should be secured throughout the study (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The informed consent form addressed data storage procedures, the purpose of the study, voluntariness and ability to withdrawal throughout the study, the extent of commitment by participating, protection of the identity by coding data, that approval is needed to include what is spoken of outside audiotaping and possible risks and benefits associated with participating. Cultural differences in the interpretation and understanding of this form need to be considered. For example, for participants of collective cultures where the concept of the individual is blurry and group obligations extend well beyond the self, or participants of cultures where literacy is not prevalent, or of patriarchal societies where women participating might create severe consequences that the researcher cannot anticipate (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Additionally, due to possible limited comprehension of the language the document should be provided in the participant’s native language (Darlington & Scott, 2002). That is why, in this study the informed consent document was translated to Arabic. Moreover, it was not considered unethical if discussion about the interview or informed consent document was done via the husband of the participant instead of the participant herself. According to Andrews (2007) most cross-cultural research is guided by a set of ethical considerations that are irrelevant, unrealistic, and/or possibly inappropriate and insufficient to address the complexity of such encounters. She stresses that the individualistic focus is not evident in all cultures. A third person present, such as an interpreter, could then increase the sense that they are participating in a social gathering which could feel more natural to the participant (Andrews, 2007). The researcher chose to bring a female interpreter to the interviews, to avoid a power imbalance.
Additionally, if the participant wanted her husband or any other person present in the interview, the researcher chose to respect the participant’s wishes and interpreted this as a cultural difference of preferences.

**During the interview**

During the interview, there are no specific guidelines how to maintain professional distance and a lot depends on the researcher’s judgement (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Yin, 2011). Brinkman and Kvale (2015) state that an interview is not just a professional conversation, but entails an asymmetrical power relation. The researcher’s role in affecting the interview, his or her knowledge about participant’s values, his or her sensitivity and commitment to moral issues are decisive factors for the quality of the obtained scientific knowledge (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). To ensure the quality of the obtained knowledge, the researcher sought information regarding the culture, took notes of reflections throughout the process and discussed with fellow researchers. After the interview, debriefing opportunities were made available for interviewees. Most participants wanted to converse further after taping and offered the researcher (and, if present, the interpreter) pastries or other dishes from Syria. As a token of respect, these offers were always accepted.

**Data analysis and report**

Finally, the researcher has the responsibility to ensure that what is reported is an accurate representation of the data and that what is excluded from reporting has been clearly defined from the start (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Yin, 2011). Continuous discussion of the analysis and reporting took place with several researchers. After one discussion, the researcher decided to include the pilot interview to the analysis and report because there seemed to be benefits for including the participant such as respect and justice for the participant’s efforts. The mothers are reported with a code from M01 to M07. Any information in the quotes of the mothers that could make them identifiable have been altered. It is crucial that if these findings will be published that possible consequences for the participants, the specific group that is studied, and society are taken into consideration (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).
FINDINGS

The findings presented in this section, are the interpretation of the data by the researcher and could differ from the participants’ meanings. In this section, a list of themes, a textural description that answers the first research question and a structural description that answers the second research question are presented. In the textural description, the themes and subthemes answer the question: How do Syrian refugee mothers experience parenting children since they have arrived in Belgium? The structural description answers the second research question: How are the experiences of parenting children in Belgium for Syrian refugee mothers related to time; the past, the present and the future?

List of themes

In the analysis, three themes were identified in the parenting experiences of the mothers; challenges, differences and strategies. However, not all mothers experienced all challenges, not all mothers pointed out the same differences and not all mothers mentioned all strategies. Common challenges in the experiences of the mothers were the loss of stability, worrying, missing loved ones, feeling unwanted, struggles of children, and doubts and regrets. The mothers experienced differences in Belgium compared to what they were used to in Syria which were at societal, language, cultural, educational and geographical level. Other experiences were strategies of the mothers which were categorized in providing a continuous base, protecting, rebuilding, adjusting, receiving support and remembering Syria. The themes and subthemes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1:
*Themes and subthemes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Differences</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loss of stability</td>
<td>Societal</td>
<td>Providing a continuous base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worrying</td>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Protecting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing loved ones</td>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>Rebuilding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling unwanted</td>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>Adjusting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggling children</td>
<td>Geographical</td>
<td>Receiving support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doubts and regret</td>
<td></td>
<td>Remembering Syria</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Textural description

In the textural description, the experiences of Syrian refugee mothers are presented.

Challenges

For the mothers, several challenges came on their path as they settled into Belgium. These challenges are: (1) the loss of stability, (2) concerns, (3) doubts and regret, (4) missing loved ones and (5) feeling unwanted. The challenges demonstrate individual or contextual difficulties that may have strained the parenting process and could give rise to concerns, worries and stress about the child’s future outcome. As the mothers do not have control over these experiences, they may form an identity of being an inadequate mother.

Loss of stability

When the mothers entered Belgium, they experienced several losses. They lost the country they knew and loved for a country they did not know. They lost their status and securities that they had built in Syria and came to a country where people did not know them, where people did not recognize their abilities in the same way and where the mothers couldn’t foresee how it would play out in the future.

M01: I had my own institute. ../I worked in places that asked for me. ../ To start from the beginning… being nothing or waiting for someone to employ you. ../ The idea of being something in your country and coming here as a refugee. It’s a very big difference.

M03: I have to find daycare, but in my situation I do not know where I will be next year. Will I still be studying Dutch? Will I be able to find a job? My future is completely open. They ask me ‘how many days a week?’ I don’t know. ‘How many hours a day?’ I don’t know ../ In Syria I know my situation. I have a job, I know how many days I work and how many days I can take off. Here I know nothing.

These examples show how some mothers had lost their stability in status, income and the ability to anticipate the future as they now lived in temporary uncertainty. That stability that they could provide for their family had evaporated. Not only could this directly affect parenting by the lack of resources needed for the child but also indirectly as unpredictability could cause levels of stress for the child and for the mother and this could affect the interaction.

Worrying
While the mothers were able to keep their husband and children in safety, they were still worrying about the safety of their siblings, family or friends. As they lived in Belgium, their minds were still in Syria where the war had not ended yet.

M06: I study but my mind is already filled. I cannot remember things well. I think of my brother; I think of the children of my brother. In the winter they do not have gas, no petrol, it’s very cold, no proper food... it is difficult. Yesterday a lot of people died in Syria. I’ve been crying for two days. I see pictures. The children in Syria are innocent, they have done nothing wrong.

The quotation demonstrates that although the mother had escaped out of the country, she could not escape from the concerns in her mind. These worries could be present in the mother as well as the children and cause levels of stress which could affect the interaction.

**Missing loved ones**

What was profound in all the mothers’ stories was how they missed their loved ones, such as their family, their friends and their neighbors. For some mothers this also resulted in loneliness and isolation in Belgium.

M03: We came here but my son doesn’t say anything ../ Later, he talks to himself when he plays and says his best friend can come and talks about his best friend. ../ I know he misses his best friend and grandparents. He says so in his stories. ../ We are with a small number here. There I can find many examples. Look at your uncle or aunt. ../ I come from a big family and here they have to live and stay alone. It is very painful for me.

M04: In Syria I have a big family. Aunt, sister, brother. Me and my husband have a big family. Here I am alone. No sister, no brother. I have to say everything.

All the mothers had similar stories about how they missed family, neighbors or friends. These examples show that the usual way of parenting in Syria included family and friends who were not here anymore in Belgium. This directly influenced how the mothers were able to execute parenting practices in forms of support and advice from their family but also indirectly as it affected their moods.

**Feeling unwanted**

Most mothers had felt that they were unwanted by some people in Belgium. One of the mothers felt that some people thought that refugees were carrying a disease or were
contagious. Another mother could not enroll her child in a certain school because he was a refugee.

M01: Some of them, you find them speaking about together or something in privacy (speaking together in privacy), you feel that there is something going on /../ I can understand from their eyes or their way /../

M06: In the waiting room of the doctor were two Belgian people. I said 'good morning’ but they did not respond. I asked them if we could go in first because my daughter was running late for school. They said: ‘No, that is not allowed. Maybe that can happen in your country but it does not work like that here.’

M03: Refugee is not a good reputation. If you say 'refugee’, you immediately feel people thinking it is a virus. “Be careful, hold your distance.” That is really painful for us.

The mother in the second example was immediately made aware of her foreign status after a simple question. These quotations show that there was a feeling or understanding that some people did not accept them. They denote how some mothers did not only lose their country but also the sense of belonging to the group. The mother might also have felt embarrassed, foreign or that she has done something wrong. Not only could this affect the mother’s mood but it could also directly affect parenting practices as parents could choose to teach children certain strategies and interpretations for such experiences. For example, in the second quote the mother later in the interview explained that she told her child not to respond to these reactions and to be patient with people who have such attitudes.

**Struggling children**

Although the mothers were able to deal with their own experiences of feeling unwanted, it was more difficult for them to see their children struggle as they adjusted to Belgium. Some children struggled to learn the language and this affected their grades while other children felt that they weren’t accepted by Belgian society.

M03: I thought it was going well in soccer and his coach didn’t say anything, but he does not like it at all. Maybe he did not understand it and the children laughed at him and he couldn’t express that very well. But later he does not want to go anywhere alone. I always had to go with him so he could feel safe.

M05: When the youngest went to school they told him ‘you are a Christian’ and did not want to play with him anymore. The children here talk about severe themes. These are not for
My oldest son struggled to make friends here. I think it’s because he is from another country.

As shown in these examples, some of the children struggled due to the language or due to some form of status by ethnicity or religion. The children who struggled in the stories of the mothers mostly struggled in making friends and feeling accepted while learning the language often improved quickly with time. The struggling of children affects parenting experiences directly as the parent could feel the need to adjust parenting practices to improve the child’s outcome but also indirectly as it could affect the child’s behavior at home and could provoke worries in the parents.

Doubts and regret

Some of the mothers experienced feelings of doubt and regret for coming to Belgium as they did not foresee the challenges that go with migration and the differences in the new country.

M03: It is difficult for me not to talk about it. About our situation, why we are here, why his nieces and nephews are in another country. He doesn’t ask me yet, but I do not want to tell him because I do not have a proper response. I ask myself sometimes: ‘Why am I here? This is not my country.’

M07: My son cried for almost a year. A lot of times, I thought; “My God, what have I done to my children? I really made a mistake.” /../ It is hard, because you have children; you always want your children to be happy.

These stories of doubt and regret were often expressed after mothers shared how their children struggled with differences and challenges in the new country. Doubts and regret could provoke worries that occupy the parent and directly give rise to new parenting practices as an attempt to improve the child’s outcome.

Differences

The mothers also experienced a lot of differences that have been ordered in: (1) societal, (2) language, (3) cultural, (4) educational and (5) geographical differences. Not only did unfamiliarity with these differences indirectly influence parenting experiences as it could affect the mothers’ wellbeing, how to operate in society and awareness of expectations and needs that could arise for the child in society, the mothers also needed to gain this knowledge to be able to teach their children how to operate in society which had a direct
effect on parenting practices. The lack of knowledge could decrease the ability to predict what their children could encounter and therefore need, learn and experience. Most parents stated the parenting goal of self-sufficiency for the children which could indicate that a parenting practice is to provide children with knowledge about how to operate in society.

**Societal differences**

In the beginning the mothers faced a lot of societal differences. Arrangements on how to provide for basic needs for their family such as housing, utilities, banking, transportation use and paperwork were foreign to them. They also didn’t know which kind of services there are in Belgium and what kind of activities there are for children to do and how to find these services and activities. Moreover, there were different laws, such as subsidies for child support, different rules such as recycling and different habits such as the communication of teachers via letters.

M02: *We visited different places like Waterloo and Aalst so that we know the history of the country that we live in. Integrating through seeing the history.*

M06: */../ The driver’s license is also different. It is easier in Syria. */../ Here there are many more rules. For example, in Syria you cross the street when you want or can and here there is a traffic light that you need to obey, but to me this is positive. It is very good. In the supermarket I wait in line. In Syria you have to yell and wave to the salesman (laughs). A good system here.*

The mothers came from a familiar society to a foreign society and had to relearn how it operates and what it is based upon. These examples show that the mothers need to familiarize themselves with the society and gain knowledge in order to provide the children with understanding and protection.

**Language differences**

Most mothers experienced difficulties with the language. While the mothers were able to use English or French, which they learned in Syria, all mothers were taking a Dutch course to increase their opportunities in Belgium. Most women were also doing volunteer work to participate in society and to practice their Dutch.

M05: *The problem is the language. There is a wall between me and the people. */../ Sometimes someone asks me something on the street or at the store and I do not understand the sentence and my answer makes them nervous or angry.*
M03: I have to do everything by email, because I need time to translate and I cannot do that while I am on the phone. /../ I ask questions because I do not know the system here. Sometimes it is not clear for them what I want to know and they give me a completely different answer. /../ There are also many letters and forms. /../ One page might cost me one or two hours to read.

These examples showed that the ability to take part in society was diminished which might also have affected their wellbeing and sense of mastery. For mothers with young children this barrier was substantial because the young children needed more assistance from the mother.

M07: /../ That is the biggest reason for me to learn the language, for my children. I would like to help my children with everything. With the language, with the courses, with school, with society, with friends, with shopping, with everything. /../ If my child wants to let a friend play at our home, I will need to ask his mother. I have to ask, not my child.

M03: /../ My son and I read together but we cannot understand everything. When we read we have to look up every word and it makes the story really boring. I really want to teach him to read, but I notice that I make it into a boring activity.

These examples show how daily routines suddenly became difficult and affected their capabilities and possibilities to perform parenting practices as the children needed new skills, such as Dutch language and knowledge about Belgium, to deal with the new environment.

Cultural differences

As they familiarized themselves with Belgium, they stumbled upon several cultural differences. Some mothers did not know how to establish contacts and most mothers were surprised by the number of working hours in Belgium. Some mothers also spoke of a different mentality in Syria.

M01: What I found, here people are stressful for nothing (laughs). /../ because I see people sad but why? I don’t know, for nothing. They are not poor. Like people in Africa they are poor but here in Europe they are rich but why are they sad? They have everything. There is a reason. Maybe they don’t have children, maybe they don’t have problems, they follow the same routine every day, waiting for what I don’t know (laughs).

M03: He asked me “Can I invite my friends in our house?” /../ I do not know their parents, so I cannot invite them. I try to explain to him that it is different here. In Syria it was easier
and more friendly. Here it is difficult. They do not have time. They are always busy. Stress. I do not know why. I cannot invite parents for a coffee. They think that is weird. They think I am... I don’t know. But that is not the way to make contact with people here, I think. I am not quite sure how I can make contact or when.

M05: I feel like I don’t have time for my children here because I need to work a lot. /../
Here the life is not easy. We both have to work hard to live a decent life.

These examples show how the mothers needed to make sense of the new culture for themselves and their children. One of the mothers said that she needed to understand Belgian mentality to understand what her child may encounter. Some mothers noticed that different themes appeared in the lives of their children in Belgium. For example, an older child that encountered drug use in Belgium and taboos that appear on television such as people kissing. Some mothers perceived Belgian children as less respectful or that children in Belgium had more freedom while other mothers did not see this. Their opinions also varied about this, as some mothers saw this as positive and others as challenging.

M04: The girl or the boy should live alone at 18 years old. I prefer not to have that. For me, for my family, no. I talk with my children; “This is not my culture. You have to live with me.” This is safe. Safety for the child. If he lives alone, I do not know if he can eat, if he has money or if he can fall asleep alone. For me, no.

This example was mentioned by almost all the mothers as a cultural difference in Belgium. Cultural differences could directly affect parenting practices as the mother might not be able to explain to the children, or possibly protect the children if she is not aware of dangers and could indirectly affect parenting because the mothers could feel concerned about what their children encounter.

Educational differences

The mothers had also had a very different experience with educational settings. Some mothers spoke of stricter teachers in Syria and less educational material, while other mothers spoke of the more theoretical curriculum and all mothers with young children highlighted the shorter timetable in Syria. One of the mothers was not used to mixed gender classes and sexual education at school.

M02: In Syria the school was more difficult, the curriculum, and it was stricter. Here the children have more freedom and more play time at the school. Here they come back from
school happier and in Syria more tired because the school was more difficult. It was shorter but it was more difficult, the hours that they were there. I prefer the system here.

M05: Here they have to decide at a young age what they want for their future. In Syria they can, until 18 they are free and then they can choose what they want to become, for example, doctor or something else.

The quotations show that mothers perceived differences in elementary school and high school and how the school system could affect their children’s wellbeing. Educational differences could directly affect the mother’s parenting practices as she lacks knowledge on how to assist her child and indirectly as she might not be aware of certain needs of the child or expectations of the school.

**Geographical differences**

Another difference was geographically. The mothers were exposed to a different climate and different environments, such as streets and location. A lot of mothers spoke about the weather or that things were more difficult to reach here in Belgium.

M03: The climate is different. For me it is difficult to come up with an activity every time. In Syria we go out a lot, but here it is cold or it rains. In Syria the sun shines almost every day. In the evening, outside, the market is open till late. In Syria our life started in the evening, here everything closes at six.

M06: The first phase was very difficult for me. I felt handcuffed because I did not know how to take a train. I was afraid I would get lost. I did not know the streets and I was not able to talk to anyone.

The examples contain cultural, language and geographical aspects. They show how general activities can be influenced by geographical factors such as weather or structure in a country and how this could directly affect their parenting practices. The mothers might also be worried if the children are outside because they are not familiar with the environment.

**Strategies**

Though the mothers had to face challenges and differences, they used strategies as mothers by; (1) providing a continuous base, (2) protecting, (3) finding support, (4) rebuilding, (5) adjusting and (6) remembering Syria. The strategies demonstrate the intention of the mothers to obtain a good future outcome for the child. The strategies could
also be viewed as modelling behavior which is a direct influence on the parenting process. As the mothers are able to use strategies to parent, these experiences may facilitate in forming an identity of being an adequate mother.

Providing a continuous base

The mothers continued with several parenting strategies as they arrived in Belgium, such as providing Syrian food, talking in Arabic and teaching children Arabic, and continuing to maintain cultural norms and beliefs.

M02: There is a tradition we want to celebrate with our children here but it does not exist in Catholic Belgium. The children put on a folklore decoration. It is a festival in which they dress up similar to carnaval.

This example shows a specific choice of the mother to continue with certain traditions even though the context does not provide the tradition anymore. These strategies could be seen as direct parenting practices with the goal of teaching children about religion.

Protecting

In the findings, it appeared that the story in Belgium already started by protecting their families. Some mothers came to Belgium because they wanted to protect their children from the sights of horror in the war, while other mothers wanted to protect their husband or son who was at risk of being forced to join the army, and most mothers could not stand to live in constant fear that something would happen to their children. As the migration was initiated by the threats in Syria, the mothers continued to protect their children from these threats in Belgium. For example, most mothers did not allow their children to hear about the news in Syria and some mothers attempted not to evoke any memories of the war.

M01: We try to forget; we try to remember the good times now. The time of war, although it was like six years, we try to remember what was before war. /../ They are affected. We cannot say that they have forgotten everything. /../ But as I told you, we never speak about such things.

M02: One of the children has nightmares that we are back in Syria. /../ I comfort her by saying we won’t go back and everything will be okay in the future.

M06: It happened one time when we were out; some firework exploded and my daughter hid behind me and started crying. She asked if the same would happen in Belgium. /../ I comforted her by showing her that the people are still walking in the street and the houses are not broken or destroyed. That life is normal here.
These quotations show that even though they had distanced themselves from the physical threat, the mothers continued to protect the children from fearful thoughts and memories in Belgium to increase feelings of safety. These strategies could be perceived as direct parenting practices to decrease levels of stress for the child and ensuring a good outcome.

**Receiving support**

In the findings, it appeared that the mothers received different sources of support. Some mothers found comfort in other Syrian families that had migrated to Belgium. Other mothers made friends at voluntary jobs, in the Dutch course and at work. Some mothers also felt supported by the efforts of the school and some mothers had also benefited from organizations that helped with integration.

M06: *Here in this town, I go to the talk café and I made many friends there.*

M04: *The teachers were very kind. They played with them, talked to them, helped them ... The love from the teachers and the principal helped them to love Belgium.*

The quotations display two kinds of support: directly received support by the mother and indirectly received by the mother through support for her children. The support that they receive could decrease stress levels for the mother and children.

**Rebuilding**

What the mothers had built for themselves in Syria to sustain their family, had to be rebuilt in Belgium. All the mothers took courses and internships to rebuild their skills. Some mothers attempted to validate their certificate from the university in Syria, while other mothers started courses, jobs or internships. Again this created more challenges for mothers with young children, because their children could not yet sustain themselves.

M07: *I would like to continue to work with my degree, but I think maybe it is too difficult because of the language ... If it is too difficult, no problem, I can do different things in the care sector.*

As shown in the example, the mother was actively involved in rebuilding her future, by taking courses, doing voluntary work and coming up with future ideas to provide for her family. This could be perceived as parenting through modelling behavior and ensuring resources for the children.

**Adjusting**
The mothers also found ways to adjust their parenting to the new challenges and differences. The mothers showed confidence, flexibility and tact in dealing with the new environment. Some mothers said that they were more careful or alert because there was more freedom in Belgium, while other mothers said that they had to explain more to their children because they were exposed to new habits.

M04: Today my daughter has a birthday party. Her friend. At nine o’clock in the evening. Her father said ‘okay’. He will go with her, stay in the car for an hour and then he goes back with her. He says only one or two hours is this party possible and then you go back with me. At nine is too late, but she would like to be with friends. Okay, but with your father. That is best.

R: Do you think it’s difficult that your ideas of right and wrong are different from the ideas in society? M03: I can use this idea to teach different things. We are different but that is okay. We do not need to imitate everything. You do not need to imitate everything.

The examples show how mothers adjusted to the new experiences and found ways to incorporate the experiences into their parenting. These examples could represent parenting practices to ensure a good outcome for their children.

*Remembering Syria*

A lot of the mothers wanted to keep Syrian traditions and Syrian mentality in their families. Some mothers spoke of a specific mentality which they could not explain in words. Most mothers often remembered good memories of Syria with their children.

M03: I think it is important that my children know that our land is there, there we have family and there we have history.

This example shows how this mother wanted her children to remember Syria and could be perceived as a direct parenting practice to benefit the outcomes of the children.

*Structural description*

In the structural description, the experiences of the mothers are reviewed with findings that represent past experiences, present perceptions and future expectations or goals.

*Challenges in relation to time:*

If the challenges are placed in a time frame, past experiences of challenges could influence how mothers perceive a challenge. For example, some mothers perceived
themselves as stronger by overcoming challenges in the past. Many mothers reflected back to past experiences of the war that have influenced them and their children for the rest of their lives. In the present years in Belgium the duration of challenges varied for the mothers. Some children and mothers strived quickly while other children and mothers continued to encounter challenges. Some of the mothers experienced all of the challenges and these experiences were numeral over a period of time while other mothers only had a single encounter with a challenge. Mothers who experienced many challenges expressed more concerns in relation to the future for themselves and the children and questioned if they should return back to Syria.

**Differences in relation to time:**

The level and impact of the differences depended partly on past experiences. Some mothers said to have experienced different cultures in Syria and therefore the experience of facing differences was not that significant for them in Belgium. Parenting views were not perceived to be part of significant experiences in Belgium. Some of the mothers did not exactly know what the views of Belgian people were and did not know to what extent they were different from their views. The mothers’ views on gender roles and parenting practices differed between the participants and most mothers claimed to also have different views compared to their siblings or Syrian people. Some mothers perceived that the mother role was a resemblance of their personality, some mothers did not perceive a difference between the roles and other mothers perceived that the mother could connect better to the daughters and the father to the sons. All mothers perceived that their parenting views and practices differed from their own childhood as generations tend to differ. Future parenting goals for the children included independence, problem solving skills, familial values, education and marriage based on Syrian traditional values. As years will progress the mothers’ encounters with differences will most likely decrease as they will gradually become familiar with them and incorporate them as knowledge about Belgium.

**Strategies in relation to time:**

The mothers chosen strategies could have been based on strategies that were helpful in the past. One of the mothers claimed to attempt to make Belgian friends by doing volunteer work but this strategy seemed to be ineffective in Belgium as there was no friendship after the work was finished. Furthermore, the mothers’ perception of the need to react could be based on her past experiences of the children. Mothers with older children, for instance,
expressed confidence about their children’s abilities as they had already experienced that the children dealt with difficulties in the past. In the present, perceptions of what are correct parenting strategies influence how the mothers will act. For example, most mothers explained that adjustment with every encounter is very important and that they knew families that didn’t adjust and stumbled upon difficulties. Some mothers further explained that discussion and openness was very important for the children’s wellbeing and other mothers explained that warmth and love was very important for the children’s wellbeing. For the future, some of the mothers stated that they wanted to visit Syria to teach their children about Syria and be in contact with their family.
DISCUSSION

Experiences of Syrian mothers

The first analysis attempted to answer the question: How do Syrian refugee mothers experience parenting children since they have arrived in Belgium? The findings identified three common themes in the experiences of Syrian refugee mothers; challenges, differences and strategies.

Consequences of challenges on parenting

In the analysis the experienced challenges that were identified were a loss of stability, worrying, missing loved ones, feeling unwanted, struggling children and doubts and regret. This finding mainly coincides with previous research as language, discrimination or environmental attitudes, distance from family and friends, and social economic status were mentioned as challenges for refugee parents (Ahn et al., 2013; Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011; Stewart et al., 2015). The described narrations of the mothers were perceived as challenges as these experiences affected the mothers in their parenting abilities for a prolonged period of time. The challenges could not be resolved by familiarization with the situation or adjustment and therefore they had no control over the situation. These experiences may have made the mothers feel inadequate as a parent as they cannot get a grip on the situation. They may have affected the child’s outcome, the ability for the mother to achieve her parenting goals or the mother’s individual experience which could affect the interaction. Some of the mothers in this study experienced discrimination. Research indicated that perceptions of discriminatory experiences could affect the mother’s wellbeing (Awad et al., 2013). Some mothers narrated that they experienced worries. Other challenges could have created worries and stress for the mothers or could decrease their parenting abilities which could in turn create worries. Research has shown that parents’ coping style with stress and their frequency of worrying about the future could influence parenting practices and affect the child’s outcome (Bryant et al., 2018; Koning, van den Eijnden, Glatz, & Vollebergh, 2013). One study demonstrated that refugee parents that suffered from stress tended to direct anger towards the children and affected the child’s conduct, emotions, and problems with peers (Bryant et al., 2018). Parents in distress could also overreact to negative events or circumstances, such as their children's misbehaviors (Conley et al., 2004).

Consequences of differences on parenting
In the analysis of this study, the mothers experienced differences on societal, language, cultural, educational and geographical level. Researchers identified differences in society as a challenge for refugee parents (Ahn et al., 2013; Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011; Tingvold et al., 2012). In the interviews of this study some mothers expressed content with the differences they had experienced in Belgium and highlighted that the difficulty was only a short period of unfamiliarity at the beginning. The quotations were identified as differences as they situated due to migration from Syria to Belgium, influenced the parenting process but were interpreted variously and could be resolvable by asking for help, familiarization with the situation or adjusting. Awad, Martinez, and Amer (2013) state that women of Middle Eastern descent might experience stress and feel that they cannot fulfill their parenting role due to insufficient knowledge of the language. Stress is one of the factors that affects the parenting process. According to researchers, adjustment to differences often depends on the specific difference, perceptions of the difference and the context that it occurs in (Engel, 1968; Salo & Birman, 2015). Some immigrants might have adjusted to a difference in a certain type of context but have refrained from adjusting in other contexts (Salo & Birman, 2015). Thus, how a difference is perceived and how the mother chooses to engage or react might vary for a mother depending on the situation it occurs in.

**Consequences of strategies on parenting**

The findings indicate that the mothers used strategies accordingly to the Belgian context by providing a continuous base, protecting, rebuilding, adjusting, receiving support and remembering Syria. The quotations were perceived to be significant strategies as they appeared to be deliberate behaviors in Belgium based on ideas of parenting that may have influenced the parenting process by modeling behavior and as part of parenting practices. Gedalof (2009) states that migrant mothers attempt to achieve stability through repetition but also to negotiate change by countless subtle adjustments and reinventions. The findings suggest that the strategies of the mothers entailed various adjustments and reinventions. The mothers provided a continuous base, received support and remembered Syria. Comparable findings were identified in other studies where they reported that language acquisition, support and cultural continuity tend to benefit parenting for refugee parents (Tingvold et al., 2012; Tsai et al., 2011). These strategies may have been perceived as appropriate reactions to the experiences in Belgium.

**Conclusions on experiences of Syrian mothers**
According to Eastmond (2007) a person forms identities by linking himself in a continuous order to the contexts that they experience. The experiences that the mothers have in which they are able to use strategies as mothers could affect how they perceive themselves as mothers. The mothers’ experiences could affect their self-concept, feelings of mastery, and sense of wellbeing (Tsai et al., 2011). Mothers that perceive that they are not able to parent their children could have effects on their perceptions of self. This indicates the importance of the ability to form a positive identity by experiencing situations in which they can perceive themselves as successful mothers. Parenting practices are influenced by past experiences and future dreams of parents (Bergnehr, 2016). How Syrian refugee mothers experience parenting in Belgium, not only affects their perceptions of self, but also how they choose to practice parenting in the present and the choices they make to achieve future dreams.

**Time in relation to experiences of Syrian mothers**

The second analysis attempted to answer the question: How are the experiences of parenting children in Belgium for Syrian refugee mothers related to time; the past, the present and the future? According to Polkinghorne (1988) human responses come from their perceptions, related to previous experiences and imaginatively created scenarios of anticipated possible consequences in the future.

*The mothers’ past, present and future perceptions on challenges*

The mothers in this study encountered challenges for a prolonged period of time before arriving in Belgium. Helgeson (2010) explains that some people might be more focused on the present while other people are more concerned with recalling the past. Some of the mothers might have been able to focus on the present while other mothers might have been more occupied with past experiences. These challenges might have been overlooked as the researcher focused on the mother’s experiences in Belgium. According to Andrews (2007) experience is not about what happens to you but about how you understand and make sense of what happens to you. Thus, mothers that perceive challenges as detrimental to their children might experience more stress which affects their parenting practices and mothers that perceive challenges as opportunities to teach their children might not denote those experiences as challenges. According to Ochacka and Janzen (2008) parenting entails a bidirectional, interactive and constantly changing relationship that is also influenced by the
child. The perceived reactions of the children should also be considered as an influence on parenting. As it showed in this study, mothers that perceived their children as struggling spoke of doubts and regrets and going back to Syria. The mothers might have perceived frightening imaginary future scenarios based on their present experience of struggling children.

*The mothers’ past, present and future perceptions on differences*

In this study, differences seemed to be related to past experiences of differences and perception of these differences. The mother’s ideas of how to parent and how to behave as a mother, a father or a child could affect how they experience parenting in the present. Mothers that have ideas that diverge from their perceptions of the present might experience more difficulties in parenting as they purposively need to change the present to benefit the imagined child’s future outcome. The relationships within the family could affect the parenting process and the child’s outcome (Kershaw et al., 2014). Mothers that have positive perceptions of their children tend to be more sensitive and responsive to their children which benefits their outcome (Cox & Harter, 2003). For professionals to improve the child’s outcome it could be beneficial to promote positive perceptions of the child. Bergnehr (2016) claims that educational success is often important for immigrant women as it is perceived as the means to a better future for their children and promises regained social status. This seems to coincide with the findings as the mothers’ future goals for the children persisted in Belgium in terms of educational success and marriage.

*The mothers’ past, present and future perceptions on strategies*

In the findings it appeared that the mothers’ strategies could have been influenced by their perceptions on appropriate strategies in parenting practices. According to Park (2010) making meaning out of experiences influences someone’s wellbeing. Meaning making can refer to a global sense of meaning in life or a situational sense of meaning in a specific situation. Thus, the mothers that perceived meaning, for example by how they were able to parent their children through diverse experiences, may have benefitted their own and possibly the children’s wellbeing. Some of the mothers in the study perceived adjustment as necessary and spoke of other Syrians who they knew that did not adjust. Desouza (2004) claims that othering is a process in which people define themselves by contrasting self with others. According to Gedalof (2009) one of the tasks of immigrant mothers is to make and remake new identities. As stated earlier, for mothers it would be important to have
successful experiences to form positive identities. Parenting experiences may also be influenced by perceptions of what it means to be a mother. Some mothers might perceive that children elevate their family and social status and provide their lives with meaning, a sense of identity and belonging and security while other mothers might perceive a higher level of stress as responsibilities increase and fall mainly on the mother’s shoulders (Helgeson, 2010; Tsai et al., 2011).

**Conclusions on time related to experiences of Syrian mothers**

Perceptions of the present in relation to past experiences and the future perspective affect the meaning of the experiences that Syrian refugee mothers have in parenting. Being able to make meaning out of experiences seems to be a buffering factor (Park, 2010). For example, several mothers in this study claimed to use their experiences to teach their children. Other ways through which meaning-making can have occurred or might occur in the future are by having found resolution, acceptance, or causal understanding, transforming identity through integration of experiences, reappraising meaning of the experience, changing beliefs, goals or meaning of life and having perceptions of growth (Park, 2010). Over time the experiences could be reinterpreted and reformulated as they are reorganized in relation to experiences of the past, the present perception and the future perspective.

**Methodology**

**Influences of context on interviews**

As stories are co-constructed in the ongoing process in which interviewer, interviewee and sometimes interpreter try to make sense of each other, attention must be paid to the specific contexts in which they are produced (Mishler, 1999).

**Presence of people**

Goftman (1959) claims that an individual infers from what is observed and communicated by people in the context to understand what is expected in this context. These inferences influence how the mother will present her story. Factors that may have influenced how the mothers presented their stories are the perception they had of the researcher and in some cases the interpreter. For example, mothers could have felt worried about the consequences of talking about certain topics with the researcher. Furthermore, some of the mothers had their husband or child present in the interview which also could have
influenced which information they chose to disclose. If these people would not have been present, it is possible that the mother would have disclosed different information. For example, some topics might have been perceived as inappropriate to discuss in front of the child. In one interview the mother scheduled to meet a friend who arrived when we were one hour in the interview. This caused that we untimely had to end the interview.

**Sample**

The sample in this study was selected by purposive sampling. It is possible that a specific group of mothers was interested in participating in interview research and that this is not an accurate representation of the Syrian community in Belgium. While investigating the individual, it is important to locate the individual within the historical and sociocultural context (Mishler, 1999). Unfortunately, Belgian organizations did not have statistics about the background of Syrian refugees in Belgium. The sample number is also relatively low. Furthermore, the different ages of the children and the children’s reactions to the experiences have made the experiences of the mothers various. However, Mishler (1999) states that variability should be the assumption in all human development research.

**Procedure**

One of the limitations of the procedure is that the interviews took 60 to 150 minutes. This duration is quite brief to trigger memories for the mothers in a new situation. Furthermore, the researcher and interpreter are both students on master level with little experience in interviewing. As mentioned earlier, the language barrier and multiple translations have affected dependability of this study. The nature of the inquiry, and the personal experiences and cultural assumptions of the researcher are filters through which the stories are sifted and represented (Eastmond, 2007). In this study, the researcher and interpreter have a different cultural background than the mothers and interpretation of the stories of the mothers may be disparate from the actual meaning. Because the transcriptions were based on the interpreter’s summaries, significant emotional or cultural meanings may be missing and significant information might have gotten lost. Additional reviews of the audio tapings by a Syrian interpreter could have increased dependability of the findings. The mothers that spoke in English or Dutch were also not speaking in their native tongue and might have explained their experiences differently if they had spoken in Arabic. Lastly, the use of two languages in the analysis has generated another threat to dependability. Desouza (2004) argues for the researcher’s need for reflexivity within cross-cultural studies.
to become aware of the position of the researcher. The researcher in this study often perceived the situation as fragile while the mothers may have experienced it as joyous and interesting. In the interviews, for example, the researcher avoided topics that made a participant cry and avoided in the rest of the study to talk about war after one participant disclosed uncomfortability with the topic. On the other hand, the mothers let their children or husband join in the conversation, offered cake and Syrian dishes and wanted to have a relaxing talk after the interview. The researcher might have interpreted stories as challenges that may not have been perceived as such by the mothers. Furthermore, due to the complex concept of parenting as a process, the research object in this study was the mother. There could have been experiences that influenced parenting that mothers did not consciously link to parenting. Therefore, it might be so that other experiences that have affected parenting were not identified. Another possibility is that certain identified experiences have not profoundly affected parenting. Desouza (2004) claims that it is important to analyze the process in which data is conceived, produced and justified as knowledge. Because there was no second researcher able to read the transcriptions, it might be possible that important information has been overlooked. Finally, inclusion of the pilot study may have affected credibility of the study. The researcher had chosen to include the pilot after subthemes and themes were chosen and used the rich quotations that coincided with the findings to let the mother’s voice be heard. Exclusion of the pilot would thus not have influenced the findings, however, the experiences of this mother were analyzed from a different perspective.

**Future research and clinical implications**

Research about this topic can help researchers and professionals understand the experiences of refugees in the migration process that influence parenting. By understanding, services may better assist refugees or immigrant families with their children. For future research, it could be informational to investigate fathers’ experiences and childrens’ experiences and investigate diverse ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, it could be informational to investigate how interpretation of experiences affect parenting practices over time. For clinical implications, this research study might benefit professionals working with immigrant families. Professionals could attempt to decrease experiences that cause stress for parents to benefit the outcomes of the children. Immigrant mothers report to experience fear, confusion and disempowerment when their values clash with agencies that are there to help them (Bergnehr, 2016). Professionals might be able to understand
immigrant mothers better if they are more familiar with their ideas based on their experiences. Pachter and Dumont-Mathieu (2004) also state that in order to understand parenting practices professionals should consider experiences that influence parenting, such as socioeconomic conditions and temporal and spatial disruptions from migration (Pachter & Dumont-Mathieu, 2004). Thus, it is important for professionals that are working with immigrant parents to take inventory on their experiences.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to describe what a Syrian refugee mother could experience in relation to parenting, perceived two to four years after arrival in Belgium. The research questions were: How do Syrian refugee mothers experience parenting children since they have arrived in Belgium? And how are the experiences of parenting children in Belgium for Syrian refugee mothers related to time; the past, the present and the future? In the analysis the three main themes that influence parenting experiences were challenges, differences and strategies. Subthemes that were identified as challenges were loss of stability, worrying, missing loved ones, feeling unwanted, struggling children and doubts and regrets. The differences were allocated into societal, language, cultural, educational and geographical differences. Finally, the subthemes that were strategies of the mothers were providing a continuous base, protecting, rebuilding, adjusting, receiving support and remembering Syria. The experiences of Syrian refugee mothers in the process of settling into Belgium could directly and indirectly influence the parenting process. Some experiences may have affected the ability of the mothers to parent, other experiences may have facilitated the mothers to intervene and benefit the child’s outcome. The parenting experiences could also influence how they perceive themselves as mothers. In the second analysis the researcher reviewed the experiences in relation to time. When the experiences were situated in a time frame, it showed that experiences could have versatile outcomes. The research demonstrates that past experiences (e.g. experiences of parenting or experiences of the children), and perceptions of the future (e.g. the imagined consequences or future goals) might influence perceptions of an experience. With this knowledge, professionals could understand how interpretation of similar events could be various and how meaning making of these experiences could affect the mother’s future, identity and possibly the child’s outcome.
REFERENCES


Belgique-Infos (n.d.). Onthaal van nieuwkomers. [online] Retrieved from:


APPENDIXES

Appendix A: Overview of Participant Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant background</th>
<th>Inclusion criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>Syrian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical background</td>
<td>Coming from country of origin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to child</td>
<td>Birth mother of child</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participant current context**
- Years physically present in new country: 2 years to maximum 4 years
- Language ability: Dutch, English or Arabic
- Living area: Belgium

**Child of participant**
- Age at arrival in new country: Between 4 and 16 years old upon arrival
# Appendix B: Selection Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Inclusion</strong></th>
<th><strong>Exclusion</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agreement with terms and signs informed consent</td>
<td>Does not answer questions due to knowledge/ language barrier based on subjective opinion of researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answers questions of full interview</td>
<td>Refusal to answer questions during the interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fits the participant’s criteria (appendix A)</td>
<td>Does not want to be audiotaped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ends the interview before all questions are answered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Answers of participant or interpreter cannot be understood by the researcher due to accent or other interpretation problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Audiotape records are not understandable due to background noises or malfunctioning of device</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maximum of 6 participants reached</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: Draft Informed Consent

Research Study for Syrian mothers: Informed Consent Document

Research done by Ellemieke Deen, student of Master In Child studies with a major in Interventions in Childhood: Social Sciences and Welfare, Jönköping University Sweden

Contact information: elliekeedeen@gmail.com / +32 485 499 621
Contact information supervisor: pia.bulow@ju.se / +46 70 22 70 500

Method: With an interview I would like to know how Syrian mothers experience raising children since they live in Belgium. The questions shall be about what parenting your child has been like since you are living in Belgium and which situations have mainly influenced parenting your child since you are living in Belgium.

Procedure: The interview is anonymous, which means that your name shall not be used and you shall receive a number. Before the interview starts, you need to sign this informed consent document to show that you know what the research is about. The interview takes about 1 to 2 hours. The interview shall be recorded on an audio device. The recordings shall be stored for two years on a personal device, except if you stop the interview before it is finished. After the interview we can have a conversation. This conversation shall not be recorded. If there’s something in this conversation (that you did not want to tell me while being recorded) that I find important for the research study, I will have to ask your permission to use this in the study. After the interview I will type every word that you have told me during the interview. I collect all the answers of all the mothers and write a rapport in English. This rapport will be part of my thesis and with this I can receive my degree at the university. You will receive a short summary of the results in English (or in Dutch if you prefer). All questions that you have, before the interview, during the interview and after the interview has taken place, will be answered.

Benefits: By participating in this interview, services that help Syrian families might be able to better assist and support these families. Participating can be a nice experience and you can get new ideas about yourself or the world. You could get more confidence and feel good about participating in research.

Risks: Possible risks could be that you feel uncomfortable or stressed during the interview, you maybe find the questions too personal or you can feel like you are doing something wrong. If you do not like the interview, you can always say that you want to stop without any further consequences.

Criteria: To take part in this research study, you need to be living in Belgium for at least 2 years and maximum 4 years. You have to live in Belgium. Before Belgium, you need to have lived in Syria. You need to be the birthmother of at least one daughter or son who has also been living with you in Belgium. You have to be Syrian.
Research Study for Syrian mothers: Informed Consent Document

Research done by Ellemieke Deen, student of Master in Child studies with a major in Interventions in Childhood: Social Sciences and Welfare, Jönköping University Sweden

Hereby declares the participant to be aware of the following:

- Participation in this study is voluntarily.
- The participant will be anonymous; the name shall not be used and the participant will receive a code.
- The participant can end being part in the study at any point in the research process and there will be no further consequences.
- Participation in this study does not cost money for the participant and the participant will also not get paid money for participating.
- Participation will be only one time.
- What is discussed in the research process, will only be discussed among fellow researchers or mentors and not to third parties who have no concern about the topic.
- Participating takes 1 to 2 hours.
- Participation can be at home or an alternative location chosen by the participant.
- Results of the research study will be published. Results will be presented as experiences of Syrian mothers.
- Audio recordings of the interview will be saved for two years on a personal device.

Date:

Name of participant: ________________________________  Signed by participant: ________________________________

Signed by researcher: ________________________________  Signed by interpreter: ________________________________
Appendix D: Interview Questions

Background questions

(1) How many years have you been living in this country?
(2) How long are you planning to stay in Belgium?
(3) What is your employment status?
(4) If employed, what is your profession?
(5) Which city do you currently live in?
(6) What are your children’s ages?
(7) What are your children’s genders?
(8) Are you religious and if so what is your religion?
(9) What is your relationship status?
(10) What is your educational background?
(11) What was your profession in Syria?
(12) Where did you live in Syria?

Interview themes

Home

➤ General parenting views
➤ Parenting roles
➤ Daily life
➤ Rules
➤ Chores & responsibilities
➤ Differences with boys and girls
➤ Support
➤ Religion
➤ Important values
➤ Concerns or problems
➤ Needs
➤ Strategies to raise the children
➤ Similarities and differences in own childhood
➤ Similarities and differences in raising children in Syria
➤ Similarities and differences in Belgian culture

School

➤ Daily life
➤ Peers and friends
➤ Concerns or problems
➤ Needs
➤ Similarities and differences with Syrian schools and Belgium

Leisure activities

➤ Activities
➤ Concerns or problems
➤ Needs
➤ Peers and friends
Appendix E: Procedure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Executed on or between</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contact with organizations</td>
<td>October 26\textsuperscript{th} to November 3\textsuperscript{rd} of 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provision of informed consent to participants</td>
<td>November 3\textsuperscript{rd} 2017 to January 25\textsuperscript{th} of 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilot interview</td>
<td>December 18\textsuperscript{th} 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact with participants for appointment</td>
<td>November 3\textsuperscript{rd} 2017 to January 25\textsuperscript{th} of 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion interview questions with researcher</td>
<td>December 15\textsuperscript{th}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion ethics in Belgium with researcher in Belgium</td>
<td>January 15\textsuperscript{th} 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion pilot interview with researcher</td>
<td>January 26\textsuperscript{th} 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews and transcription no more than 1 day after the interview took place</td>
<td>January 31\textsuperscript{st} to March 7\textsuperscript{th} 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussions about data and analysis with fellow researchers</td>
<td>March 10\textsuperscript{th} to May 25\textsuperscript{th} 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of data starting from interview date</td>
<td>January 31\textsuperscript{st} to May 9\textsuperscript{th} 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporting of findings</td>
<td>March 17\textsuperscript{th} to June 2\textsuperscript{nd} 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of results</td>
<td>April 26\textsuperscript{th} to June 2\textsuperscript{nd} 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submission</td>
<td>June 3\textsuperscript{rd}</td>
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