

RESEARCH ARTICLE

WILEY

Self-legitimation and sense-making of Southern European parents' migration to Norway: The role of family aspirations

Raquel Herrero-Arias^{1,2}  | Ragnhild Hollekim^{1,2} | Haldis Haukanes^{1,3}

¹Department of Health Promotion and Development, Faculty of Psychology, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway

²Child Welfare, Equality and Social Inclusion Research Group, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway

³MC-Venues in Health, Gender and Social Justice Research Group, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway

Correspondence

Raquel Herrero-Arias, Department of Health Promotion and Development, University of Bergen, Christiesgt. 13, Bergen 5020, Norway. Email: raquel.arias@uib.no

Abstract

This article explores the migration narratives of Southern European parents living in Norway, where family projects emerged as a central theme. Migrant parents told stories not only of disillusionment and sacrifice but also of satisfaction, which they articulated around their aspiration to have a family life after migration. We analysed the informants' storytelling and explored the ways that family aspirations manifested. By articulating their migration experiences through their aspirations to grow their family, the migrant parents claimed a position as subjects in Norwegian discourses on parenting and citizenship and distanced themselves from discourses on labour immigration and immigrant parenting. The article aims to contribute to the scholarship on motivations for post-2008 intra-European migration and on narrative legitimation by drawing attention to the way migrants use their family projects as a vehicle for self-legitimation, for claiming rightful membership to the host society and for justifying this position to themselves and others.

KEYWORDS

aspirations, intra-European migration, parenting, self-legitimation, storytelling

1 | INTRODUCTION

- My husband and I knew that when it came time to having kids, it was going to be in Norway because we didn't have a real job in Italy. For me, working in tourism and having children would have been very difficult because you can't compare the benefits you have in Norway with the benefits you have in Italy. It's also that here, having children is seen as natural, whereas in Italy, it's seen as something weird. Norway is a good country for having kids (Agnese, Italian mother, two children, between 5 and 10 years in Norway).

Agnese's remarks mirror contemporary Norwegian discourses on parenting and children. As stated by the Norwegian children's

ombudsman in 2009, Norway is considered 'the country of children, not just because it is one of the best places for children to grow up, but it is also the place where we have developed care and protection of children to the highest standard' (Hjermann, 2009, p. 14). Norwegian discourses on children as individuals with their own rights have been particularly strong (Gullestad, 1997; Hollekim, Anderssen, & Daniel, 2016). These portray Norway as the 'country for children' because of its child-friendly legislations and policies (Hennum, 2014). This special value given to children has been discussed with regard to national symbolism and self-image and is seen as a way through which the country presents itself as an egalitarian, democratic, peaceful and innocent nation (Hennum, 2017; Satka & Eydal, 2004). Being considered individuals with their own rights and legal protection, children and their well-being are recognised as a societal matter in the country (Eydal & Satka, 2006 cited in Hollekim et al., 2016, p. 52), further legitimating public interest and intervention in family life (Leira, 2008).

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Scandinavian countries in general are known for their family-friendly policies and gender equality (Isaksen, 2016). And Norway's July 2018 policy entitles parents to a paid leave of 49 or 59 weeks, depending on whether they choose to receive 100% or 80% of their salaries. This parental benefit period consists of a 3-week suspension of work duties prior to the birth for the mother, along with a maternal quota of 15/19 weeks, a paternal one of 15/19 weeks and a shared period of 16/18 weeks (NAV, n.d.). Afterwards, public childcare is guaranteed and extensively used and available at reasonable prices, and parents who prefer homecare are entitled to a quite generous allowance or tax deduction for expenses related to hiring a babysitter (Isaksen, 2016).

These types of public provisions have promoted the representation of Scandinavian countries as a model of family-friendly policy in the Southern European social imaginary (Marí-Klose, Fuentes, & del Pino Matute, 2015). This portrayal can be reinforced by the mismatch Southern Europeans experience between their aspiration to have children and the family policies that fail to help them reconcile parenthood with their careers (Esping-Andersen, 2009). As a result, a 2018 survey found that Spanish women have their first child, on average, 5.2 years later than when they first considered it ideal (INE, 2018). Among the reasons for delaying motherhood were employment conditions and difficulties to achieve work–family balance.

Reconciling work and family life appears even more unlikely in Southern Europe since the onset of the financial recession of 2008. This crisis was marked by a collapse of the building market and the implementation of austerity measures, which resulted in new societal configurations characterised by corruption, unemployment and poor working conditions, and a renewal of intra-European South–North mobility (Bygnes, 2017; Capucha, Estêvão, Calado, & Capucha, 2014; Isaksen, 2016; Triandafyllidou & Gropas, 2014). The increase in outward migration was more noticeable in Spain (González-Ferrer, 2013), and this is evident in the growth of this community in Norway. With 6,211 residents, Spaniards comprise the largest Southern European group in this Scandinavian country (Statistics Norway, 2018). Many of the Southern Europeans who migrated after 2008 were young highly educated, unemployed professionals (Lafleur & Stanek, 2017) looking for ways to cope with the consequences of the recession, including the difficulties in achieving their family aspirations. As Isaksen (2016) argued in her study of the meanings that Italian migrant mothers in Norway gave to public welfare services in host and origin countries, the Norwegian market–family–state arrangements seem ideal for this population because it supports their identities as middle-class parents and professionals.

In this article, we analyse the narratives of migration of Southern European parents living in Norway. Stories are a vehicle through which individuals constitute themselves as subjects (Gabriel, 1995 cited in Maclean, Harvey, & Chia, 2012, p. 19), and justify their position to themselves and to others. Therefore, our goal in exploring migrants' stories is to contribute to the emerging scholarship on drivers of intra-European emigration after the 2008 financial crisis by exploring how Southern European parents narrate their migration to

Norway, as well as to contribute to research on narrative legitimation by analysing how migrants narrate their family projects and what may be accomplished through their storytelling.

2 | THEORISING POST-2008 INTRA-EUROPEAN MIGRATION

Recently, new theoretical formulations aiming to bring a better understanding and conceptualization of migration have been developed (Bal & Willems, 2014; Carling & Collins, 2018; Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 214). Studies have looked at migrants' aspirations in an attempt to provide an analytical lens to better understand how migrants, as active agents, make sense of their life worlds and migrate based on their own interpretations of push–pull factors (Carling, 2002). A focus on aspirations brings, therefore, an understanding of the drivers and experiences of migration beyond the notion of economic rationality. It also recognises the moral dimension of migration, as individuals evaluate their migration projects not only in relation to personal gains but also in moral terms (Carling, 2002). Rather than rational choices, aspirations can be seen as assertions of identity shaped by culture and standards of morality (Frye, 2012). Because what is considered a good life differs across sociocultural contexts, aspirations are never individual but are formed as part of a system of ideas and beliefs (Appadurai, 2004). Therefore, the exploration of migrants' aspirations needs to take into account the context in which these are embedded (Bal & Willems, 2014), bringing a better understanding of how people navigate their social spaces (Appadurai, 2004).

Studies within the field of intra-European migration have stressed that higher wages and job opportunities are not the sole drivers for South–North mobility after 2008, but Southern Europeans' broader life aspirations play a crucial role in their decision to emigrate (Pratsinakis, King, Himmelstine, & Mazzilli, 2019; Varriale, 2020). Particularly, researchers have stressed political dissatisfaction, searching for better quality of life, self-fulfilment, career opportunities, pursuing an intergenerational middle-class position, leading an independent adult life and ensuring stability for the future of their children as reasons for this migration (Bartolini, Gropas, & Triandafyllidou, 2017; Bonizzoni, 2018; Bygnes, 2017; Bygnes & Flipo, 2017; Lafleur, Stanek, & Veira, 2017, p. 6; Pratsinakis, 2019a; Pratsinakis et al., 2019; Triandafyllidou & Gropas, 2014; Varriale, 2020).

In this regard, Bygnes and Erdal (2017) developed the concept of 'grounded lives' to conceptualise Spaniards and Poles' desires to have a stable and secure life in Norway. In an uncertain context of postfinancial recession (Triandafyllidou & Gropas, 2014), young adults might see migration as a 'way to get ahead in life' (Pratsinakis et al., 2019, p. 22) and settle down in the host country permanently (Bartolini et al., 2017; King, Lulle, Conti, & Mueller, 2016; Pratsinakis, 2019a). These aspirations challenge the notion of 'liquid migration' used to define the free intra-European mobility characterised by economic motivations, lifestyles of mobility, increased individualization and temporariness (Engbersen, 2012).

3 | SENSE-MAKING AND NARRATIVE LEGITIMATION

Sense-making is a process through which individuals interpret themselves and the world in which they live, the changes they face, and frame them according to past understandings and experiences (Thurlow & Mills, 2015, p. 248). This process is linked to identity formation because sense-making is a tool through which individuals explain to themselves who they are, as well as seek meaning, plausibility, coherence and legitimacy (Eshraghi & Taffler, 2015; Patriotta & Brown, 2011). Narratives¹ are a crucial ingredient in sense-making because they act as the basic structure that individuals use to give meaning to human experience and to construct coherent redescriptions of the world (Polkinghorne, 1988 cited in Eshraghi & Taffler, 2015, p. 694; Thurlow & Mills, 2015). Sense-making through the construction of narratives does not occur in a vacuum, but it is informed by formative contexts or 'a set of assumptions, arrangements, and shared ideas that exist to produce and preserve a particular version of social life so as to make routine behavior and existing structures seem permanent' (Rostis, 2010 cited in Thurlow & Mills, 2015, p. 247). In this context, there are some meanings that are considered more legitimate, and the resources that are available to individuals constrain and enable their interpretative choices (Thurlow & Mills, 2015). The creation of stories is, in this way, shaped by the interpretive needs and desires of the storytellers and the available discourses.

Aware of what is considered a 'good story' in their temporal and spatial contexts, storytellers construct stories that are contextually located and directed to particular audiences. Scholarship in the fields of management and organisation has shown the ways in which storytelling and sense-making are related to legitimacy-seeking (Eshraghi & Taffler, 2015; Landau, Drori, & Terjesen, 2014; Maclean et al., 2012). Legitimacy involves the performance of actions that are seen appropriate in a certain context. In this line, the production of narratives has been considered a legitimisation strategy because it is a process through which storytellers locate experience within an approved storytelling framework (Vaara & Tienar, 2008). Consequently, a narrative approach allows for the exploration of narratives of legitimacy within the storytellers' sense-making process (Thurlow & Mills, 2015), as well as for the analysis of the discursive resources available to storytellers and the way they put these into play (Foley & Faircloth, 2003, p. 168).

Despite the theorisation, the way migrants use narratives to construct legitimacy during processes of migration has remained unexplored. This article addresses the question of how migrant parents make sense of and legitimate their migration by exploring the narratives of migration of Southern European parents in Norway. It focuses on the role that their family projects play in their storytelling as a legitimisation strategy that is used to justify their migration and life in Norway. This Scandinavian country provides an interesting context for this study because of its family- and child-centred legislation and policies.

4 | STUDY PARTICIPANTS AND METHODOLOGY

The data analysed here were collected as part of a larger research project on parenthood in migration among Southern Europeans in Norway. The analysis was based on in-depth interviews conducted with 16 migrant parents in three Norwegian municipalities in 2017. In addition, the first author also gathered data by attending gatherings organised by the Spanish and Italian communities in Norway, such as a barbeque, a Sunday lunch and a Christmas dinner. These events gave her an opportunity to have informal conversations with the informants, as well as with other Southern European migrants. This provided the background information about the context in which the storytelling took place. She was also part of Facebook forums where migrants living in Norway share information and engage in conversations.

Informants were recruited via Facebook forums used by Southern Europeans living in Norway, the first author's personal network and the snowball method (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). The study participants consisted of 11 mothers and five fathers between the ages of 30–46. The number of children varied between one and three, and their ages between 8 months and 17 years. Most of these children (11) had been born in Norway. The informants were Italian (two), Greek (two), Portuguese (one) and Spanish (11) and had lived in Norway for three to 14 years. Apart from one mother who was single, the parents were married or cohabiting with a Southern European (seven), Norwegian (seven) or Swedish (one) partner (see Table 1).

All but five of the participants had a university degree and middle-class jobs. Those without higher education worked in manual occupations, and two informants had not succeeded in finding a qualified job in their professional field in Norway despite having a university degree. Their work was in the field of nursing, architecture, engineering, office work and housekeeping. Likewise, their family backgrounds were diverse. Some participants mentioned that their parents were well educated and worked as professors, civil servants or entrepreneurs running large family businesses. Others indicated that their parents had been through economic hardships and worked in unskilled/semiskilled occupations, such as factory worker or electrician.

The first author, a Spanish researcher who lives in Norway, conducted all interviews. To identify potential biases that might affect the research, she took a reflexive approach (Riessman, 2008) and had discussions with her research team during data collection and analysis. Following Kondo (1990, p. 13), she reflected on how the participants positioned her depending on the research context and their interaction. Moving to Norway from Spain after 2008, having no children and working in the country, she was in a situation in which most informants had been before. These different aspects of her identity (a migrant, a Spaniard, a young woman or a professional) were emphasised by the interviewees who attempted to explain and give some advice regarding her own future in a Scandinavian country.

TABLE 1 Participants' overview

Pseudonym	Sex	Nationality	Age	Education	Years in Norway	Nationality of partner	N. Children	Age of Children	Children's birthplace
Linda	F	Greek	35–40	University	5–10	Norwegian	2	3 and a half years and 8 months	Norway
Vanessa	F	Greek	35–40	University	More than 10	Norwegian	2	4 and 8 years	Norway
Sabrina	F	Italian	40–45	University	More than 10	Norwegian	1	10 years	Norway
Agnese	F	Italian	40–45	University	5–10	Norwegian	2	3 and 6 years	Norway
Nieves	F	Spanish	45–50	University	Less than 5	Norwegian	2	9 and 11 years	Spain
Miriam	F	Spanish	40–45	Primary Education	Less than 5	Single	1	8 years	Spain
Pino	F	Spanish	40–45	Primary Education	Less than 5	Spaniard	1	17 years	Spain
María Jesús	F	Spanish	35–40	Secondary Education	5–10	Spaniard	2	1 and 4 years	Norway
Daniel	M	Spanish	40–45	Secondary Education	5–10	Spaniard	1	4 years	Norway
João	M	Portuguese	35–40	University	Less than 5	Swedish	1	20 months	Norway
Antonio	M	Spanish	40–45	University	5–10	Spaniard	2	4 and 6 years	Spain
Inés	F	Spanish	40–45	Secondary Education	5–10	Spaniard	2	4 and 6 years	Spain
Raúl	M	Spanish	30–35	University	Less than 5	Norwegian	3	2 years, 5 months twins	Norway
José	M	Spanish	35–40	University	5–10	Spaniard	1	9 months	Norway
Carmen	F	Spanish	30–35	University	5–10	Spaniard	1	9 months	Norway
Eva	F	Spanish	35–40	University	5–10	Norwegian	2	9 months and 3 years	Norway

This resulted in rich data on their experiences as migrant parents in Norway.

Apart from two interviews conducted with couples (mother and father), the interviews were individual, and all of them had a narrative approach with open and exploratory questions. In order to get rich descriptions that made it possible to contextualise interviewees' storytelling, participants were asked about their family backgrounds, life prior to migration, critical turning points, transitions and being parents and raising their children in Norway. Each interview lasted between 75 and 120 min and was conducted at a place of the interviewee's choice, which ranged from their homes or workplaces, at the university or in a café; additionally, one interview was conducted through Skype. The selected language for the interviews was Spanish (12) or English (four).

Regarding data analysis, we drew on insights from an experience-centred narrative approach (Squire, 2013), according to which narratives are means of sense-making constructed from embodied, gendered and unequal positions within the social world. Following the thematic narrative approach (Riessman, 2008), we looked at the content of the narratives and identified thematic patterns across

them. In this regard, after an initial reading of the transcripts, 'the quest for a good family life' arose as a strong cross-cutting theme that also structured the migration narratives. Moreover, when we looked at them in their entirety, we found that interviewees aimed to account for their migration.

5 | STORIES OF MIGRATION ARTICULATED AROUND FAMILY PROJECTS

The parents' stories were diverse with regard to the factors that motivated their migration, the challenges and opportunities faced in Norway and Southern Europe and the assessments of their lives after moving abroad. However, a notion of living in Norway to fulfil their family projects, that is, having children and being involved in their upbringing, was common across all the narratives regardless of storytellers' social class or whether they had children prior or after migration. The informants' parenthood provided a structure for their migration stories, giving meaning to and articulating experiences and decision to migrate.

The introductory excerpt from Agnese points out her and her husband's decision to move to Norway when they had children and is an example of this pattern. Other interviewees made it similarly clear that the financial recession was not the only reason for migrating, and they attributed their departure to the possibility to fulfil their family projects in Norway because of the family-friendly working conditions supported by welfare state's principles and provisions. The parents highlighted that without children, they would have stayed in Southern Europe with unstable jobs and long standard workdays. In terms of the prospect of becoming parents, the majority of informants realised that their countries of origin were not places for their children to have a 'good' childhood or for them to be properly involved as parents. They based this perception on the parenthood experiences of friends and relatives and on their own experiences with the postcrisis context of unemployment and limited welfare provisions. Sabrina, who has lived in Norway between 5 and 10 years, shared her experiences in the following way:

- The recession came, and then, it's just far too difficult to get a job in Italy. Then, we had the baby, and maybe if it was just us, we'd have tried anyway ... but it's also because I think that Norway is a good place for my child to grow up in (Sabrina, Italian, one child).

Many informants imagined how raising their children in Southern Europe would be and concluded that they faced too many challenges in balancing work and family life there. For those who had already had children before migrating, their past experiences with unemployment, unstable income and long working hours reinforced their perceptions of Norway as a good place to fulfil their family aspirations. The migrant parents portrayed Spain, Italy, Portugal and Greece as countries with 'no future', which reflects their perceptions that the financial recession has had an impact on these societies beyond the purely economic. João, a Portuguese father, told us,

- How were we [João and his wife] going to manage with a child? Having different shifts, with all the workload we had, without a family or somebody who supported us. If something happened to either of us in Spain or in Portugal, we were helpless, without support from the state or whatever. We spoke about this sometimes, and this was always an important factor for us to leave (João, less than 5 years in Norway, one child).

Most parents had educational and occupational resources that, to some extent, prevented them from becoming unemployed. However, even if they were employed in their home countries, they stressed that the working conditions and state provisions did not support their family projects. If they would have stayed there, the informants argued that they would have needed their relatives' help to balance

parenthood and their careers. Concerning family life and work, they claimed that Norway appeared to be a 'good country' to have children in because of the family policies and public provisions that facilitated the family arrangements they aspired to have. They spoke highly of the parental leaves and family-friendly working conditions, as the next excerpt shows:

- It's true that here, it [having children] is great, easier. In terms of work, you say, 'I'm pregnant', and they [employers] don't look badly at you. You feel they're glad [...]. If you have two children, the maternity leave is two years[in total], which is nothing compared with the time you are going to work, so they see that in this way, while in Spain, they see it as 'fuck, you are leaving for a year!' (Eva, Spanish, between 5 and 10 years in Norway, two children).

Eva, Sabrina, João and Raúl are part of the group of informants who described themselves as highly educated professionals who had already lived abroad before moving to Norway and had realised that Southern Europe was not a good place to build a family. In their imaginaries, Norway was constructed as the ideal environment to fulfil their family projects not only because of its welfare state but also because of Norwegian discourses on family, parenthood, gender equality and children, which they found to be in line with their personal values and aspirations. Raúl, who has three children, shared the following:

- I wanted to settle down somewhere; then, I thought it was more feasible in terms of family to do it here. I had lived in Scandinavia before, so I knew a bit about how things work here, the culture, the parental leaves. You have a good life with children here. Family life is respected (Raúl, Spanish, less than 5 years in Norway).

The mothers employed in working-class occupations mentioned the economic recession as an important reason for leaving their countries of origin more often than informants with middle-class jobs. However, when they narrated their stories of living in Norway, they did not stress the educational, work- or income-related opportunities that this country offers to their families. Their stories of life after migration were articulated around their aspiration to raise their children in a child-centred country with a family-friendly welfare state and a model of society based on the values of respect, equality and participation, as Miriam said,

- It's also that in Norway, I can have more time with my child and don't stress about money. [...] the school is great, lots of fun, outdoor activities, less stress for my child too! (Miriam, Spanish single mother to one child, less than 5 years in Norway).

The fathers especially appreciated the paternity leaves as an opportunity to be involved in their children's upbringing right from the start and to share the care responsibilities with their partners.

- In olden times, we had the idea that the father was outside and the mother was at home. Here [in Norway], it isn't like that. [...] You aren't discriminated against for being with your child; it's even considered right that you spend time with your child. [...] They try to get the two parties [parents] involved in the children's upbringing and family life (João, Portuguese, less than 5 years in Norway, one child).

The migrant parents understood that Norwegian policies support their own ideas about the kind of gender-egalitarian and two-income household they aspired to build. This is shown in the next excerpt from Daniel, a Spanish father to one child,

- The [parental] leave influences you a lot [...] because you get so very involved with the child, and this makes a difference in the upbringing; the child is closer to you, the bond is strengthened [...]. [In Spain,] they say 'communication with your child is fundamental', of course, but don't be a hypocrite, to have good communication with your child, you have to spend time with them, and you [the employers] don't give me time (Daniel, between 5 and 10 years in Norway).

When the participants referred to Norwegian discourses on gender equality, family and children, they distanced themselves from other Southern Europeans. Raúl described himself as not being 'the most typical Spanish guy' but as a person who has travelled and adopted a positive attitude towards challenges. 'The typical Spanish guy', then, is regarded as a person with fewer life experiences and who is emotionally attached to Spain. The male interviewees also differentiated themselves from 'the typical Southern European' father who is less involved in his child's upbringing.

- I've seen in Spain that mothers and grandparents pick up the child from kindergarten. Fathers aren't that involved (Daniel, between 5 and 10 years in Norway, one child).

Moreover, the informants, especially those with middle-class jobs, further distanced themselves from the typical Southern European parent regarding some parenting practices they associated with their countries of origin. The typical Southern European parent was thought to perform more obedience-based and intrusive parenting practices.

- I noticed that in Portugal, I was a bit weird regarding how I wanted to raise my child. With my godson, I wanted to spend time outdoors with him, I promoted

doing things outside, in nature [...]. Therefore and in regards to this, I feel I fit in much better here than in Portugal; I feel more comfortable here than if I were in Portugal (João, less than 5 years in Norway).

By distancing themselves from Southern Europeans, the informants described themselves as parents whose values and understandings of 'proper' childhood and parenting are in line with those portrayed in Norwegian hegemonic discourses. Sabrina pointed out that the best part of living in Norway is that children 'are more respected as children than they are in Italy'. For Nieves, a 46-year-old Spanish mother of two who has lived in Norway for 3 years, Norway was a good country for her children to grow up in because their voices are heard. The parents associated themselves with the understanding that children are individuals that have their own rights, an idea that is reinforced by societal, institutional and media discourses on Scandinavian child rearing policies and practices (Gullestad, 1997). Another way of drawing a boundary between themselves and Southern European parents was manifested in the interviewees' disillusionment and frustration with the kind of societies that their countries of origin developed after the economic recession. They distanced themselves and the families they wanted to build from Southern Europe with regard to moral values and stressed that they refused to raise their children in a place with corruption, nepotism and injustice. Linda, a Greek mother who has lived in Norway between 5 and 10 years, shared,

- I think Norway is a good country for my children to grow up in. Ideally, I'd love for them to grow up in Greece, but there are many things going on in Greece now, and I'm not talking only about finances. I'm glad they are growing up with Norwegian values, and I try to give them as much of Greek culture as I can [...]. Like in Greece, it's more like there is no respect [...] [...], because of the financial crisis, it became more opportunistic and much more like 'now we have to fight for everything' [...] 'I only take care of myself, and I don't care about anyone else' and as a result, [the society is] much more openly racist. In contrast, Norway is still very naive and protected in a good way (Linda, two children).

In her study of the migration motivations of highly skilled Spaniards coming to Norway, Bygnes (2017) analysed migrants' reluctance to cite the economic crisis as part of their symbolic and social boundary work. The migrants in her study drew a symbolic boundary between themselves and 'the typical labour migrant' who either takes up benefits or works in low-skilled jobs. Our informants drew symbolic boundaries referring to parenting and family life. When the interviewees distanced themselves from other migrants, they did not refer to their reasons for migrating, types of jobs or welfare benefits. However, they drew a boundary between themselves and an image of 'other migrant parents' that can be found in public debates

and media discourses, where the meeting between migrants and the Norwegian welfare state is portrayed as problematic (Hollekim et al., 2016).

- There are parents that are afraid of child protection here, but we need to look at their social class because maybe there are already barriers ... in Norway, gender discrimination isn't as latent as in Eastern Europe [...] This is very important because it's very different here, so maybe they don't understand the system (João, less than five years in Norway, one child).

João drew a symbolic boundary between himself and working-class Eastern European migrants who 'do not understand' the Norwegian system, which promotes gender equality and children's rights. By doing so, he positioned himself closer to Norwegian understandings of not only family, parenthood and childhood but also the role of the state in family life and in monitoring children's well-being.

6 | STORIES OF DISSATISFACTION

While emphasising their satisfaction with their family lives after migration, the parents' stories were also marked by disillusionment and sacrifice. In Norway, they found opportunities to build the kind of family they aspired to and to be more involved in their children's upbringing. However, they did not feel their situation was perfect, mostly because of disagreements with some upbringing practices and values, difficulties in accessing family-friendly state provisions and their distance from their extended families.

As presented earlier, Eva, Sabrina, Nieves and Linda are part of a group of informants with middle-class jobs who described Norway as a good country for their children to grow up in due to its welfare state, its model of society and the values its welfare institutions promote. However, they also talked about their disillusion with some social conventions about family life and child-rearing practices they encountered. Eva found 'parenthood in Norway to be quite rigid'. She lives with her family in the city centre and perceives that Norwegian parents and the kindergarten staff 'take for granted that I should move to the outskirts because I must have a garden for children run in'. Nieves also perceived this expectation and narrated it as a social 'pressure'. Furthermore, the mothers disliked that children were protected against some practices that they themselves did not categorise as dangerous, for example, moderate alcohol consumption in front of the children.

As we found in other narratives, this group of mothers was especially critical of the lack of competitiveness within the child-rearing practices encountered in Norwegian welfare institutions. Egalitarianism was seen as an illusion based on their experiences with corruption in Southern Europe and discrimination in the Norwegian labour market. And although the informants spoke highly of the Norwegian educational system and the values it promotes, they were concerned about their children being raised in an environment that did not

prepare them for the competition that is necessary to succeed in an unequal world. As Linda said,

- In Norway, 'everyone is good and gets a medal'. It shouldn't be like that [...] because children won't be able to make it; my child wouldn't be able to survive in Greece, for example. (Linda, Greek, between 5 and 10 years in Norway, two children).

Dissatisfaction with practices and values encountered in Norway came across the informant's narratives regardless of whether they had a Norwegian or a Southern European partner and was not linked to the years they had lived in Norway. However, time may play a role in parents' adherence to practices and values encountered in the host country. For example, Vanessa reported that because she had lived nearly half of her life in Norway, she had adapted to Norwegian practices and ideals. As she put it,

I came here when I was so young, actually next year I'll have lived half of my life in Norway, so I think everything is good here, I don't question anything. (Vanessa, Greek, more than 10 years in Norway, two children).

Furthermore, disillusion was more prominent in the stories of parents who failed to find a job in their professional field, despite having proper qualifications. For some, the family-friendly working conditions of their current jobs compensated for this, whereas others were deeply dissatisfied with the impossibility of finding a middle-class occupation. Other stories marked by disillusion were told by informants who realised that they had no access to family-friendly welfare provision because of their precarious working conditions, which hindered them from meeting the requirements for entitlements. Miriam shared her story of life in Norway and framed it around her involved motherhood and bringing up her child in a child-centred country. This included the challenges she experienced before obtaining a Norwegian national ID number (fødselsnummer) and a permanent job that would give her access to family-friendly service provision. She shared how she moved to Norway aiming to find a flat and a job quickly so that she could secure the ID number that would guarantee access to welfare provisions and rights, which were crucial for bringing her child from Spain.

- I wanted the fødselsnummer so I'd get more rights; if you don't have that number, you have nothing [...] How do you bring your child? You don't have a doctor, neither does the child ... whereas if you have the number, children don't pay healthcare [...] How do you sign him/her up at school? Everything is difficult [without a fødselsnummer] (Miriam, less than 5 years in Norway, one child).

She described the difficult 30 months she spent working precariously in Norway until she finally obtained the desired ID number.

This period was characterised by the anguish over being away from her child and her feelings of disappointment and impotence when she met welfare professionals and employers in her attempts to obtain the ID number.

- The fødselsnummer is another story. Nowadays, you need a working-contract of six months minimum [...] and a housing-contract [...]. They didn't accept my working-contract [...] because my employer didn't want to write a specific number of hours. I needed the contract with a certain number of hours, and the housing-contract wasn't enough because it was only a room.

Once she obtained the ID number, Miriam realised that she could not enjoy the family-friendly workdays of her colleagues with a permanent contract. She was still an on-call employee when her child arrived in Norway, which, as she narrates, meant family-unfriendly working conditions.

- If you are an on-call employee and the child is sick and you stay at home, you don't earn any money. You don't have paid holidays either [...], but if you are a permanent worker, you have these rights [...]. I've noticed a big difference. You say [as a permanent worker] 'I have to leave because of my child', and they [employers] say, 'Okay, no worries'.

A common feature of the parents' stories of migration was the sacrifices they made when they moved to Norway. One commonly experienced sacrifice was being far from family and friends, which led to experiencing a poorer social life than that which they were used to having. Most of them understood this as the 'price' they had to pay to live in a country that allows them to be more involved in their children's upbringing. When they referred to these sacrifices, the informants articulated their stories with their children and family projects at the centre. Most of them highlighted that 'you can't have it all', but they decided to sacrifice good weather, their extended family and a rich social life so that they could be the parents they aspired to be. Others emphasised that their duty as parents was to ensure their children's good childhood, at the expense of their own preferences.

Despite sharing more time with their partner's extended families, informants with Norwegian in-laws also stressed that being far from their own parents was a big sacrifice for them and their children. This was especially clear in the stories of those who had recently become parents and missed sharing this new experience with their own families. In the same way, the migrant parents who had raised their children near their relatives in closer knit rural communities before migration stressed that their distance from them was the main reason why they believed that they were facing many challenges in accomplishing their family projects in Norway. As Antonio, a Spanish father who moved to Norway between 5 and 10 years ago, said,

- If we were from [a big city like] Madrid that is one thing, but in Spain, we used to live [in a town] close to my sister-in-law and her children [...]. My children and hers were together all day. Here, they are alone. This is the hardest thing. (Antonio, two children).

These parents also presented a more stereotypical image of the 'Norwegian character' as cold and asocial. As Inés, Antonio's wife, commented,

- [In Norway,] the kindergarten is better, there's lots of nature, but what do you do with the children after kindergarten? Stay at home and a few more things [...]. The child likes doing things with children, and they have no cousins here, and you go to a park, but people here are very dull, nobody interacts. This is why I doubt we have a good life here. (Inés, Spanish, between 5 and 10 years in Norway, two children).

In their views, they practice an involved parenthood, but their children could not have a good childhood because they could not enjoy being with their extended family. This was out of reach and could not be compensated neither by the relationships built in Norway or by support from the welfare state.

7 | SELF-LEGITIMATION THROUGH FAMILY ASPIRATIONS

In this article, we examined what migrant parents aimed to accomplish with their storytelling about their family aspirations. By doing so, we contribute to literature on narrative legitimation and bring a better understanding of how migrants parents interpret their experiences and position themselves in relation to significant others and hegemonic discourses on parenting, immigration and citizenship. Inspired by the lens of sense-making and storytelling (Maclean et al., 2012), we discuss that the parents tried to make sense of their migration experiences and to legitimate themselves as parents and citizens through their storytelling and family aspirations in particular contexts and discourses.

Rather than telling stories around the notion of liquid migration (Engbersen, 2012), the Southern European migrants stressed their wishes to live grounded lives. This goal is a desired scenario in Norway (Bygnes & Erdal, 2017), where being a good parent and having a harmonious family life have been found to be the most important aspiration for highly educated middle-class citizens (Sakslind & Skarpenes, 2014, p. 322). Our informants expressed similar aspirations, simultaneously pointing to how parenthood was not supported in the same way in Southern Europe. Their descriptions of employers who dismiss pregnant workers and policies that hinder parents' work-family balance were cited as examples of this.

To better understand their aspirations, it is relevant to look at the life stage in which migrants were when they decided to migrate

(Bonizzoni, 2018; Bygnes & Flipo, 2017; Varriale, 2020). When the majority of our informants left their countries of origin, they were in the process of transition to adulthood. Yet the markers of such life stage, like leaving home, achieving financial independence and forming a family, were difficult to achieve in the context of the post-2008 financial crisis (Allen, 2016). Migration to Norway was, therefore, constructed as a strategy to overcome a middle-class reproduction crisis (Bonizzoni, 2018) and 'get ahead in life' (Pratsinakis et al., 2019), achieving independence from their parents and obtaining the socio-economic stability that sustains their family projects.

Family aspirations emerged as a crosscutting theme across all the narratives, and this worked to articulate and give unity and meaning to the parents' migration stories. Likewise, dissatisfaction with some Norwegian child-rearing ideals, and with distance from relatives, was common in informants' accounts. However, the findings suggest variations among the narratives. For example, most migrant parents who positioned themselves closer to notions of children as individuals who have rights and of child-rearing as dialogued based and expert guided had middle-class jobs. This reflects the contextual character of storytelling and sense-making processes and the importance of looking at the context in which migrants' aspirations are formed in order to understand the role these play in their narratives (Appadurai, 2004).

In Norway, parenting norms are in consonance with 'intensive parenting', the dominant ideology of child-rearing in Western societies shaped by middle-class values and notions of children's vulnerability (Bendixsen & Danielsen, 2018; Lee, Bristow, Faircloth, Macvarish, & Furedi, 2014). Intensive parenting constructs parenting as 'child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive and financially expensive' (Hays, 1998 p. 9), and its development has been parallel to an expansion of family policies and expert knowledge on child-rearing (Lee et al., 2014). Norwegian discourses of parenting and childhood form a narrative context in which our informants could create stories of migration drawing on these discourses as suitable resources for the task of legitimation (Foley & Faircloth, 2003). Telling stories of migration around their aspirations to achieve a child-centred and gender-egalitarian lifestyle connected migrant parents to a larger discourse normalised in the host country (Gullestad, 1997; Hennem, 2014; Hollekim et al., 2016; Leira, 2008). We can expect that, informed by their middle-class and western-European backgrounds, the majority of participants aspired to comply with the notions of good parent constructed within intensive parenting, which are portrayed in Norwegian discourses on children and parenting. Yet if informants' personal circumstances, like age, social class and parenthood, were different, or if other discourses were available, we might expect that they would have legitimated their migration and settlement in the host country through other stories.

In this regard, we discuss that family aspirations can be also used to legitimate different experiences of migration, such as temporal labour mobility. The case of Spaniards in China is an example of how the prospect of having children can be used to legitimate migrants' return (López, 2017). Likewise, Bell and Bivand's (2015) study on Poles in Norway, the largest immigrant group in this country, illustrates how family aspirations justify the temporal labour migration

among members of this group. The decision not to have grounded lives in Norway and have instead a temporal transnational parenthood suggests that family projects can be used to legitimate experiences of migration that are different from those of our informants. The aspiration to have a good family life, understood as achieving a better living standard in one's country (Poland), can be a tool to legitimate short settlement in the host country. In our study, the aspiration to have a good family life, understood as one that is child centred and has involved parenting, legitimated a more permanent stay in Norway. This reflects that individuals' aspirations are formed as part of a system of ideas and beliefs and, therefore, the study of aspirations cannot overlook these sociocultural contexts (Appadurai, 2004; Bal & Willems, 2014).

Finally, the migrants' family aspirations can be understood as moral claims about the migrants' present self (Frye, 2012) because the informants defined what type of person they are by describing what type of person they aspire to become and assessed their migration projects in relation to moral values (Carling, 2002). As Raúl told us, 'I wanted to settle down; therefore, I came to Norway. Obviously, my goal wasn't to throw parties'. His aspiration to 'settle down' by building a family and having a stable life can be seen as an assertion of his identity as an adult. The informants' aspirations are morally laden in the sense that they represent certain norms and values regarding life planning, stability and child-rearing that are present in public discourses in Norway.

8 | POSITIONING ONESELF IN NORWEGIAN DISCOURSES

Narratives provide insight into how storytellers position themselves in relation to discourses (Lanza, 2012, p. 288). With the notion of involved parenthood, the migrants in our study drew on broader societal norms, claiming participation in discourses on parenting, children and citizenship. Across the narratives, the informants highlighted that their decision to raise their children in Norway was not solely motivated by welfare state provisions and family-friendly working conditions. A more democratic educational system and a 'purer' lifestyle also supported their perception of Norway as a 'good country for children to grow up in'. When asked why they perceived Norway like this, the parents stressed the moral values of respect, honesty, integrity and being a 'good citizen'.

The participants' descriptions of such moral values underpinned their family aspirations as well as the society and welfare state they imagined to be ideal for their family projects. As other scholars have pointed out, Southern Europeans' political dissatisfaction is a major motivation for post-2008 intra-European migration (Bartolini et al., 2017; Bygnes & Flipo, 2017; Triandafyllidou & Gropas, 2014). However, the migrant parents in our study not only mentioned political dissatisfaction but also stressed their discontent and the negative perceptions of their government as a way to demonstrate that they fit into Norwegian society. It is relevant to note that values of contributing to society, egalitarianism and gender equality are propagated

through public discourses on the Norwegian welfare state and society (Bendixsen & Danielsen, 2018; Leira, 2008). Our informants appreciated the importance given to these values, in contrast to Southern European societies, which they claimed to be characterised by corruption and a lack of meritocracy. They also expressed their aspiration to build the dual earner–carer model of family that Norwegian discourses and policies support. Telling stories of migration around their family aspirations can be a way of claiming rightful membership in a community with which they share values and interests.

At the same time, they dissociated themselves from 'the typical' Southern European citizen who is not trustworthy with respect to other citizens and the welfare state and from the typical labour immigrant who is a potential drain on the Norwegian welfare state. It was common among the informants to distance themselves from labour immigrants who were represented as victims of the economic recession moving to Norway to earn money through work or to receive social benefits. By citing their family projects as an important motivation for migration, the informants claimed their self-legitimacy as subjects in Norwegian discourses on citizenship, parenthood and children, and they distanced themselves from discourses on immigration. This is particularly relevant because the general discourse on immigration in Norway has moved in a more anti-immigrant direction over the last decade (Lanza, 2012). After the 2017 election, a new centre-right coalition government that included the Progress Party, which is known for stressing the strains placed by immigrants on the welfare state in their discourse, came into power. In particular, during the data collection, this discourse on immigration was high on the public agenda.

Regarding Norwegian discourses on parenting and children, migrant parents have been portrayed as challenging Norway's understandings of proper parenting and childhood (Hennum, 2014; Hollekim et al., 2016). These discourses have represented migrant parents as 'the other' who perform inappropriate and even dangerous practices in relation to their children (Bendixsen & Danielsen, 2018). Given the current Norwegian discourses on immigration and (immigrant) parenting, it is important to explore how the informants positioned themselves in relation to them and how they negotiated their identities through their storytelling. A general impression from the interviews was that the participants defined themselves as embracing, with some reservations, the parenting practices and values they encountered in Norwegian discourses. For example, middle-class parents seemed to do so by constructing an image of other migrant parents who disagree with the hegemonic Norwegian discourses on childhood and parenting. Such an image has been found in politicised debates or media discourses that portray the encounter between migrant parents and the Norwegian welfare state, especially with child welfare (Hollekim et al., 2016), as problematic. In particular, the informants contrasted their parenting with the social imaginaries of Eastern European authoritarian parents and presented themselves as successful and 'worthy' migrant parents.

They also distanced themselves from other Southern European parents who were portrayed as performing more obedience-based parenting practices. Thus, our informants' parenting practices play

a role in their quest to belong (Longman, De Graeve, & Brouckaert, 2013). By instilling 'Norwegian' values in their children and performing important Norwegian parenting practices, the migrants negotiate their recognition of Norwegian discourses on parenting and citizenship. The parenthood they aspired to, which fits Norwegian parent–citizen and child–citizen hegemonic models, strengthens their recognition as good citizens. Parenting arises as a citizenship practice through which the migrants respond to hegemonic discourses on labour immigration and immigrant parenting.

9 | CONCLUSION

The migrant parents told stories that reproduced Norwegian discourses on parenting and family life that also illuminated the tensions they experience in their attempts to meet their aspirations. Storytellers construct their stories from their positions within the social world (Squire, 2013). In this respect, informants' employment situation, which would secure access to family-friendly provisions and working rights, and their social support in Norway, were decisive in carrying out their family projects and meeting their aspirations. Particularly, those who had not been able to find a job in their profession or a permanent position after migration underlined that they faced more challenges in living the lives they wanted. While all the narratives were articulated around the storytellers' aspirations to be involved parents in Norway, disillusionment was also present due to sacrificing time with friends and relatives, and dissatisfaction with some child-rearing ideals encountered in Norway.

By articulating their migration stories around their aspirations to build a family in Norway, the migrant parents positioned themselves in relation to hegemonic discourses on immigration, parenting, childhood and citizenship. Their family projects, in contrast to their career prospects, connected them to broader societal and morally laden discourses on parenting and childhood in the Nordic country. This positioning provided them a positive resource for understanding themselves and their migration experiences, and it allowed them to draw a boundary between them and other parents and labour immigrants. Aspiring to become a 'modern' parent in the family-friendly, child-centred and gender-egalitarian country of Norway was central to their identity work, and functioned as a moral claim about 'the kind of person' they are. We understand the parents' family aspirations and their storytelling of the challenges and tensions encountered in fulfilling them as part of their self-legitimation strategies.

Our study provides insights into narrative research as a lens for exploring how individuals position themselves in discourses and negotiate their identities through storytelling. We do this by contextualising the analysis of the informants' narratives in Norwegian discourses and the storytellers' interaction with the interviewer, a Spanish researcher who lives in Norway. Considering that audiences and narrators know the criteria of credibility and plausibility (Eastmond, 2007), we can assume that our informants might have tailored their responses in relation to how they perceived the

interviewer's expectations regarding the societal discourse on labour immigration and (immigrant) parenting. We argue that study participants knew what is considered a good story in Norway and what could be a good story to tell a Spanish scholar researching migrant parenthood in this country. The first author was the immediate audience who listened to the informants. Being a Spanish immigrant herself, the migrant parents might have assumed that she was familiar with dominant Southern European public and media discourses portraying emigrants as desperate victims of the recession and corrupt politics (Bygnes, 2017; Pratsinakis, 2019b). In this context, a good story to tell would be one in which they portray themselves as resourceful. This choice might have also been motivated by the narrative context itself because, as Pratsinakis (2019b) claimed, most people tend to stress their agency in their decision to migrate when they are asked to reflect on it. Articulating their migration narratives around their family aspirations might have been a result of their wishes to distance themselves from politicised discourses of immigration and immigrant parenting in Norway.

At the same time, and because the informants shared basic identity characteristics with the interviewer, we believe that the storytelling happened in a context that facilitated the participants' disclosures. However, in other contexts, like in more informal settings with migrants, they may have legitimated themselves through different stories. Regardless, our analysis calls for further attention to self-legitimation processes in narrative research to tell more complex stories about migrants' meaning-making and identity construction processes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Professor Anouk de Koning and her team of "Reproducing Europe" for valuable inputs and discussions during the first author's research stay at Radboud University.

ORCID

Raquel Herrero-Arias  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2631-5970>

NOTE

¹ The terms 'narrative' and 'story' are often used synonymously (Riessman, 2008), and in this article, we use both terms interchangeably. Following an experience-centred approach, we understand that narratives include all meaningful stories of personal experience that people produce (Squire, 2013).

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How to cite this article: Herrero-Arias R, Hollekim R, Haukanes H. Self-legitimation and sense-making of Southern European parents' migration to Norway: The role of family aspirations. *Popul Space Place*. 2020;e2362. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2362>