Living and dying with the state: The Netherlands according to Egyptians in Amsterdam

Ruijtenberg, W.D.

4

Children as the future

In Egypt, migration is scripted as a means for men to finance marriage and "open a house", or start a household (see Chapter One, Schielke, 2020). The Egyptian men I met at the different associations were among the men who had managed to do so, and the Egyptian women I met had joined their husbands in the Netherlands because they imagined that life in the Netherlands would be better for them and/or their children. However, by the time I met them, the men and women I worked with were disillusioned about the future that migration had brought about for them, and instead spoke about migration as a sacrifice for their children. They emphasized the hardship they had endured in order to give their children the opportunities they had never had, and how hard they still worked to raise their children into virtuous adults, who both conform to Egyptian norms and values, and do well in the Dutch education system and on the labor market (see Abrego, 2014 for similar narratives among Salvadoran parents in the US).

In the meantime, parenthood had connected parents to schools and a range of child and youth welfare and healthcare services and the people that represented them. As I will describe in more detail, in the name of equal opportunity, these organizations and professionals are supposed to pay additional attention to the so-called 'second-generation', as well as their 'non-Western' parents, who may not be equipped to help their children to take the equal chance the supposedly meritocratic Dutch education system grants them and/or are liable to transmit

'non-Western' cultural norms and values. Or, framed differently, these parent and child organizations and professionals increasingly operate at the intersection of the desire to ensure that all children have equal opportunities and the desire to reproduce the Dutch nation.

In this chapter, I take parents' and policy narratives as my cue to investigate the practices through which the idea of migrant parents as different materializes. Concretely, I investigate the inequalities that these practices bring about, the way in which they mediate relations, between parents and professionals, parents and their children, and fathers and mothers, and the way in which they feed off and into those self-identifications as a sacrificing parent. To do so, I draw on events and workshops for parents organized or hosted by the different associations where I conducted my fieldwork, and the meetings between the people I worked with and their children's teachers and associated welfare and healthcare professionals that I witnessed and participated in. I begin with a short overview of how (Egyptian) migrant parents figure in (Dutch) policies and research.

4.1 Children as the future

In this world of nation-states, migration has been conceptualized as imperiling the social-cultural reproduction of the nation (e.g. Erel, 2014; Luibheid, 2013), as well as the socialization of children into the family and the various social, cultural, religious, and political communities to which their parents belong (cf Feldman Savelsberg, 2016; Coe 2013).

In line with these concerns, the dominant line of research on migrant parents traces how the parenting practices of immigrants of different nationalities develop in comparison to 'native' parenting practices, e.g. by studying if and to what extent migrant parents adopt the parenting styles prevailing in their country of residence (e.g. Pels and Nijsten, 2017). In line with the larger immigrant-integration literature, this body of work not only glosses over differences within and similarities between national groups, but also treats 'native' parenting practices as the norm to which 'immigrant' parents should conform, (re)producing the 'us versus them' narrative in which 'we' are good parents and 'they' may genuinely care about their children, but do not take good care of them (e.g. van den Berg 2017).

Meanwhile, anthropologists have followed migrant mothers on the move to study how they transmit belonging from a distance and/or on the unfamiliar and sometimes hostile grounds of their countries of transit and destination (e.g. Coe, 2013; Gilmartin and Migge, 2016; Feldman Savelsberg, 2017). They found that, as they transmit belonging to their children, migrant mothers also produce and reproduce a sense of belonging for themselves, and not only through

their children and extended families, but also through the people they meet on the move and the professionals involved in their children's lives. I found that, for the people I worked with, parenthood kept alive the idea of a better future that had motivated them to leave Egypt in the first place. Still, despite their ability to transmit belonging, in a situation of legal precarity, many migrant mothers find themselves in what Soukaina Chakkour and Anouk de Koning (2022) call a space of hesitation as to where that future would be, 'here', in Europe, or 'back home'.

Feeding off and into these lines of research, policy makers in the Netherlands and across Europe have long expressed paternalistic concerns about the children of parent-Others (e.g. de Regt [1984] on efforts to 'civilize' working class parents; Stoler [2002] on efforts to 'civilize' native parents). Following the iconization of the 'unintegrated immigrant' as the quintessential Other to the Dutch norm (see Chapter Two), Dutch policymakers increasingly directed their concerns to the children of immigrants. These kids were seen as growing up in parallel worlds, and thus as both at risk and risky. They were at risk because as adults they would lack opportunities and civic values, and they were risky because as a result they could end up hanging out on the streets, terrorizing neighborhoods, resort to radical Islam or illicit money making, or depend on welfare services (Slootman and Duyvendak, 2016).

In this light, Dutch policy-makers began to see immigrants 'underuse' of child, youth, and parenting support services as part of the problem, because, at a distance, professionals would be less able to guarantee the safety and healthy development of all children and/or deliver necessary services (Ponzoni, 2015). This gap between immigrant parents and state-services, in turn, was seen as resulting from immigrant parents 'lack of familiarity with and trust in state services, as well as a general mismatch between available services and immigrant parents' needs and wishes (ibid). To bridge this gap, policymakers in Amsterdam began to incorporate immigrant associations in their parenting support programs (ibid). Seen as spaces in which immigrant parents already came together to discuss the challenges of everyday life, immigrant associations were supposed to become spaces in which policymakers, welfare professionals, and immigrant parents could (re)build relations of trust, so that policymakers and welfare professionals could learn about immigrant parents' needs and wishes while immigrant parents could learn about the available services (ibid).

The directors of the Egyptian associations where I conducted my fieldwork used this as an opportunity to organize or host funded workshops and other activities for immigrant parents. Over the course of my fieldwork, Karima, Malika, and Gamal and Bahaa all welcomed a representative of the municipality whose job it was to inform immigrant parents about, and help them apply to, various forms of financial support that they were entitled to by virtue of their

children, such as funding to buy a laptop for their children's schoolwork and sports activities. In a context in which immigrants' supposed overreliance on welfare benefits is seen as one of the main threats of immigration, the existence of such an officer took me aback, but reflects the concerns about children, and shows how that concern is at odds with the deep-logic of limitation.

On paper, and in practice, these workshops and the larger policy initiatives of which they are part draw on and reproduce stigmatizing images of Arab/Muslim fathers as authoritarian and absent, and of Arab/Muslim mothers as oppressed and submissive. As such, they put the onus of improving the lives of immigrant children on parents rather than the politicians and policy makers who have more influence on the structural forces that actually shape the lives of immigrant families in the Netherlands. At the same time, they also created a space for people who self-identified as non-Dutch parents to come together, and make sense of their experiences.

4.2 A clash of cultures?

In the spring of 2017, Gamal and Bahaa invited Trias Pedagogica to organize a workshop on involved fatherhood at Etihad. In the week leading up to the workshop, only one or two people showed up for Etihad's weekly meeting, fueling Gamal's and Bahaa's lingering annoyance with people's lack of investment. But, on the first night of the workshop, nine Egyptian fathers and two Egyptian mothers showed up, a decidedly good turn-out. At 7:30 pm sharp, Gamal welcomed everyone to this very important workshop, and after offering some initial reflections on the importance of strong families, gave the floor to Ahmed, the course instructor.

Speaking in a mixture of Fusha (Modern Standard Arabic), Darija (Moroccan Arabic) and Dutch, Ahmed welcomed the participants. He then introduced himself as an expert on intercultural parenting by training and experience, and the workshop as an invitation to participants to explore their roles as fathers. This began by recognizing that children grow up between their parents, their school, and their wider social environment, and that there are many ways of being a good father, but that at the very least, all fathers should be involved in the process of using 'carrots' and 'sticks' (incentives and punishments) to positively influence their children's behavior. Some participants nodded. Ahmed asked if there were questions, but no-one raised a hand.

As there were no questions, Ahmed started a first round of discussions by asking participants to share an experience to do with the challenges of raising children in between two cultures. This was really just meant to break the ice, he said. Ibrahim was the first participant to open up. As an Egyptian, he expected his children to treat him with respect, but in the Netherlands

children are raised to stand up for themselves and articulate what they want, and he did not know how to combine the two, he said. The other parents nodded. Mustafa shared a more concrete example. His nine-year old daughter was in a hurry to grow up, and after nagging him about it for months, he had recently allowed her to start wearing a hijab, a headscarf. She had been very proud, but when she ran into her neighbors, they had told her that they were sad to see her like that. This had upset them both, Mustafa admitted, and he did not know how to proceed. As the ice had been broken, one after the other chimed in. Mahmoud did not want his son to go to his stay-away school camp, but did not want to make him stand out. Tarek had been told to put his fourteen year old daughter on a diet, but as a father who was away at work most of the time anyway, he felt it was his task to spoil her, and his wife Somaya wanted to know how they could prevent their ten and eight year old sons from fighting with each other. Magdy worried that his children would want to live on their own after high-school, which he said was impossible. Amr said that he felt like his thirteen year old son was beginning to take some distance, just like his twenty-four and twenty-one year olds had done at that age. I cannot keep them inside, and if I ask what they are up to, they will not tell, he said.

Ahmed patiently listened, validated parents' feelings, and every now and then provided some initial advice, emphasizing the importance of consistency and of rewarding and penalizing behavior, not the person. After about two hours, Ahmed began to wrap up, encouraging everyone to keep the distinction between the person and their behavior in mind as they addressed the parenting challenges of the week to come. One by one, the participants thanked Ahmed for his insights and suggestions, and then left.

The Trias Pedagogica workshop is one of many workshops on intercultural parenting that frame immigrant parents and their children as caught between cultures (van Huis, 2018). This frame may easily be criticized for the way in which it conceptualizes culture and difference as static personal attributes (van den Berg, 2016). However, as the stories shared during that first evening indicate, for my interlocutors, 'culture' (*thaqafa*) was a welcome starting point to talk about the everyday challenges of raising moral 'Egyptian' adults in the Netherlands.

As I described in Chapter One and Chapter Two, the people with whom I worked readily imagined Egyptian and Dutch cultures as at odds with each other. As parents, they feared that their children would be morally corrupted, and that their attempts to prevent that from happening would end up creating tensions between them, their children, and the state actors involved in their children's lives. The challenge of raising children in the Netherlands, then, was not only how to transmit Egyptian norms and values without pushing their children away or alienating them from the Netherlands, but also, and perhaps most poignantly, how to do so while also pre-

venting negative responses from the Dutch. As the stories of the workshop participants' stories indicate, this was an everyday challenge.

The people with whom I worked readily shared these concerns among each other, but they usually refrained from opening up to professionals out of fear to create tensions or trigger unwanted interventions. I was surprised they opened up to Ahmed like that, but then again, Ahmed was not immediately involved in the participants' or participants' children's lives, and as someone who had identified as non-white, Arab, and Muslim, had moved to and settled in the Netherlands himself, or maybe just as someone who was extremely good at what he did, he was able to give advice without appearing judgmental, triggering an avalanche of questions that parents apparently had.

4.3 More than culture

On paper, workshops like the Trias Pedagogica workshop invited parents to discuss the challenges of raising children in between two cultures, but in practice, they also provided space for parents to discuss other kinds of challenges, and thus to resist the sole focus on culture. This became apparent during the second week of the workshop.

After the first week, in which he spent his time probing conversations, in the second week, Ahmed shared two videos and gave a presentation. The first video featured a Moroccan family. In the first shot, the father reprimands his son for returning home late. In the next shot, the boy's mother tells his father that he should not take his anger out on his son, only to be reprimanded by the father for getting involved. The second video featured five Moroccan men reflecting on their experiences raising children in the Netherlands, in Dutch. According to the first father, it was hard to raise children in the Netherlands because physically disciplining children is not allowed and, on top of that, Dutch teachers and policemen are too 'soft'. The second father found that children in the Netherlands are at risk because the small Dutch houses leave parents little choice but to send their children out on the street for several hours a day. The third father felt that Moroccan fathers should become more involved in their children's lives instead of pointing to external factors, while the fourth father claimed that most Moroccan men still had to learn how to raise their child in the Netherlands. The video ended with a fifth father who called on Moroccan fathers to stand up for their children more. We helped build this country, we have paid taxes, so our children should benefit like Dutch children, he said. As the second video ended we all applauded.

Ahmed then presented a two-dimensional parenting styles model, with one axis ranging

from '*laissez faire*' (laissez faire) to '*dwingend*' (controlling) and another from '*democratisch*' (democratic) to '*autoritair*' (authoritarian). Some parents want to know everything about their children while other parents give their children a lot of freedom, he said, moving his hand from controlling to laissez fair. Similarly, some parents decide everything for their children, whereas other parents try to reach a decision together, he continued, now moving his hand from authoritarian to democratic. Following the example of his own parents, Ahmed initially idealized an controlling-authoritarian parenting style. However, when he became a parent himself, he discovered that children also had to learn from their mistakes and to take charge of their own decisions. This was particularly so in the Dutch context, he said. Ignoring for the moment the statement of the last speaker in the second video, Ahmed explained that the fighting in the first video, and the challenges that the first two speakers in the video had experienced were the result of similar clashes between parenting styles, while the mother in the first, and the second two speakers in the second video were beginning to recognize that they had to adapt their parenting styles to the Dutch circumstances.

As Ahmed reached his conclusion, we applauded again, and some participants thanked him for his presentation. Then Bahaa stood up. Facing both Ahmed and the participants, he thanked Ahmed for the insightful presentation, and turning his gaze to what was now his audience, he told everyone to take note of what Ahmed had said. Then, returning his gaze to Ahmed, he said that to have a fruitful conversation, it was important to recognize the difference between Moroccans and Egyptians. We are different people, and came here at a different time and under different circumstances, he said. Ayman chimed in, saying that in general, Moroccans in the Netherlands are less educated than Egyptians, and therefore less focused on their children's education. This is the reason Moroccan children are on the street, he said. Still standing, Bahaa nodded, but returning his gaze to the audience, began to talk about the difference between Egyptian and Dutch families.

Dutch parents, he claimed, are smart. They have one or two children, nine-to-five jobs, and are dual earners. As a result, they have a good life, he said. Turning his gaze to me, he then began to explain Egyptian families. On average, Egyptians have six or seven children, he said. In the Netherlands, we have fewer children, but still many more than Dutch people, he continued. Still, Egyptian women are not supposed to contribute to the family income, while Egyptian men are not only expected to provide for their wives and children, but also for their extended families, he said, switching from 'we' to 'they'. On top of that, they want to travel to Egypt once a year and give their children every little thing they desire. So they always work, morning, day, and night, seven days a week. That's the problem, he concluded, finally sitting down. We all

returned our gaze to Ahmed, who said that Bahaa was right to point out that for many fathers, providing an income is one of the main ways to be involved, but emphasized that, no matter how hard they worked, there are always other ways to be involved too. The three women in the room smiled conspicuously to each other.

The videos, the two-dimensional parenting model, and Ahmed's presentation drew on the analysis of cultural differences to suggest that Moroccan parents should adapt their parenting style to Dutch circumstances. However, it left some space for other forms of difference as well, including socio-economic differences between Dutch-Moroccans and Dutch. Bahaa took this space to zoom in on the differences between Moroccans and Egyptians, which according to him were not merely cultural, but also brought about by migration histories, family composition, and employment. In the process, he discussed some of the structural reasons why the parents I worked with were actually more likely to become subject to the kind of interventions that they feared. As he spoke, I suspected that Bahaa was thinking of a family we had visited earlier that week. They had been in severe debts for years, and now their six year old son was struggling in school. To Bahaa, it was clear that what they needed was debt relief, but instead, the boy's school's care coordinator had sent the boy and his mother to an intensive parent-and-child workshop, which was just another obligation, which was probably the last thing they needed. However, in keeping with the Trias Pedagogica philosophy, Ahmed encouraged the workshop participants to focus on what they could do differently, rather than what was beyond their influence anyway, such as the way in which schools and child and youth care in the Netherlands are organized. Bahaa understood this well, and I suspect that this was why he did not make his views explicit, and why he did not talk about racism or discrimination, which he did bring up in other contexts. To explore how parents engaged with the topic of racism, I will move to the gatherings that Karima hosted at her association, Tamkin.

4.4 Racism?

In the spring of 2017, Karima received funding to organize workshops on mental health for migrant women and one on anti-radicalization for Muslim parents. She used some of that money to bring together a group of Egyptian mothers on Monday and Wednesday in a neighborhood center in Amsterdam Noord. For about two hours, they discussed a broad range of topics, over tea, coffee, and cookies. In addition to Egyptian and Dutch politics, their families and their everyday experiences with the Dutch healthcare system were among the most popular topics. At one point or another, the conversation always turned to Dutch institutions, in part because

Karima was one of the more vocal critics of the way in which some Dutch institutions operated, but more so because these institutions played such a central role in the lives of these mothers.

One morning, some seven mothers were discussing the Dutch healthcare system when Soraya, an outspoken mother of four in her late forties, shifted the conversation to her eighteen-year-old son, Mohamed. According to Soraya, Mohamed was applying for internships but was repeatedly rejected, even though his classmates had long succeeded in securing theirs. According to his mother, this was a clear case of racism. Her friend, sitting next to her, disagreed. "Mohamed is just lazy", she exclaimed. "You don't even know if he applied." "Everyone knows they won't take a 'Mohamed'", said another woman. "It took my son a year to find an internship", another contributed. Other mothers were more skeptical. "Only God knows what our children are up to", someone mused. Another mother shared the story of her neighbor's son. The boy had also claimed that he could not get an internship, although as it turned out, he had long been accepted but just did not like it. "Can you imagine!?" She sighed, shaking her head. Other mothers were more pragmatic. "Maybe he should look for Muslim businesses", one suggested. "Or just change the name on his CV", another added. "No, no, no", Karima protested. "Our children were born here. This is their country. Mohamed should be hired as himself, not as 'Jan' or 'Kees'". The women laughed. "So what am I supposed to do," Soraya asked. No one seemed to know, and the conversation drifted onto other topics.

A few weeks later, racism came up again when Ghada brought up the situation of her nine-year-old daughter Yasmin. When Yasmin was six years old, she was sent to speech therapy. According to her teachers, speech therapy would help her catch up with language. At first, Ghada was happy and hopeful it would benefit Yasmin. Three years later, Yasmin was still behind, and, recently, her teachers had suggested the option of a school for children with special needs. Ghada instead had Yasmin tested for dyslexia. The test results confirmed that she indeed had dyslexia. According to Ghada this showed that her daughter was not stupid but needed additional time. She had hoped that the test result would inspire her daughter's teacher to invest in her more, but to her astonishment, Yasmin's teachers had not believed the diagnosis. "These days you can buy any result you want", the teacher had apparently said. "That might be true", Ghada told the other mothers at the table, "but if Yasmin were Dutch, they would not doubt the results". This time, the other mothers unanimously agreed, and the conversation turned to the practical question of what to do. "This is unacceptable", one mother exclaimed. "You should go there and tell them." "Yes, tell them you will go to the police", a second mother said, with a twinkle in her eye. Everyone laughed. "No, seriously", the first mother persisted. "I think you should go there and take care of it." "I cannot just go there and start talking about racism",

Ghada objected. "They will not accept it. It will only create more problems for Yasmin".

As David Theo Goldberg (2006) has argued, in the wake of the Second World War and the unfathomable horrors of the Holocaust, race and race-thinking were never to have a place in Europe again (see also Lentin, 2008). However, as race and race-thinking were declared to be something of the past, enduring racial inequalities were denied as such and instead understood as class, cultural, religious, or immigrant problems (Goldberg, 2006: 356). This shift towards European "raceless-racisms" also led to a tendency to "personalize and individualize racism, to reduce racist violence to a few rotten folks, to restrict apartness especially in residential, educational, and employment arrangements and access to untouchable segregating schemas of personal preference and the lure of the familial and familiar" (ibid: 359).

These European dynamics played out in the Netherlands too (Essed and Hoving, 2014), where racism has been ignored, denied, and disavowed through claims of race neutrality, color-blindness and a discourse of tolerance (Wekker, 2016). Still, race was talked about, and in recent years, some of these conversations were mainstreamed, turning race and racism into topics of intense public debates. This has been ferociously so in the context of debates about the racist figure of Black Pete (Hilhorst and Hermes, 2016) and in response to emerging studies showing structural racism in the education system (e.g. Gemeente Amsterdam, 2007), the labor market (Andriessen et al, 2012), the police force (Çankaya, 2012; Amnesty International, 2013) and the tax-office (Frederik, 2020).

Next to the socio-economic structures mentioned by Bahaa during the Trias Pedagogica workshop, these reports and the public debates offer an additional explanation for why children like those of my interlocutors are more likely to end up on the margins of the Dutch education system and labor market. However, like many socio-economic accounts, they did not provide a satisfying or conclusive answer to why some of my interlocutors' children ended up at the margins of the education system and labor markets while others did not. Soraya and the women gathered around her knew that applicants with 'foreign-sounding' names were less likely to be invited for an interview than applicants with a Dutch-sounding name with a criminal record (van den Berg, 2017). They could not rule out the possibility that Mohamed was discriminated against nor could they dismiss the other alternative explanations for why Mohamed had not yet secured an internship that some of the other women readily provided. Indeed, in a context in which racism is not absolute, there are always alternative explanations.

This uncertainty is reminiscent of the post-civil rights United States as described by John Jackson. According to Jackson (2008: 9), after the 1960s, "African Americans have become more secure in their legal citizenship but concomitantly less sure about other things, such as

when they're being victimized by silent and undeclared racisms." Apparently, this uncertainty about racism gave rise to mistrust and fear, the bedrocks of "alarmist and conspiratorial attitudes and assumptions," turning racism into a "crucial explanation for social suffering and government disregard" (ibid: 2-3). Like African Americans in the post-civil rights US, Egyptian parents in Amsterdam entertained racism as an explanation for their suffering. However, while Egyptian parents were suspicious, they were not 'paranoid' in the way that John Jackson suggests African-Americans were. More importantly, while the African-Americans described by Jackson seemed to feel empowered by 'paranoia' in the sense that it made them feel that they were seeing the US for what it really was, reimagining the Netherlands as racist actually produced uncertainty about whether or not their children were discriminated against, and how to deal with that. Instead, this uncertainty may be best understood as a form of doubt.

Doubt, as Matthijs Pelkmans (2013: 3) points out, "connotes an active state of mind which is directed at a questioned object and is unstable in the sense that it pushes for a resolution." As such, doubt not only refers to the ontological question of "what is" and the epistemological questions of "what is true", but also, and oftentimes more pressingly, to the pragmatic question of "what to do" (ibid: 2). The people I worked with did ask the ontological and epistemological questions. However, these were scary questions, as the answer could be that the Netherlands is racist and that it is true that their children are likely to be sidelined, which would turn the hardship they had faced into just that – hardship – rather than a sacrifice for their children's future. The question of what to do was more hopeful, for it suggested that something could be done, and thus kept alive the idea that a better future was possible. As such, it provided a sense of purpose, in the way of doing whatever it takes. So, as my interlocutors discussed suspicious incidents, they swiftly veered to the question of what to do. When Soraya shared her concerns about her son Mohamed, she received several suggestions as to how her son could address the situation, such as changing his name on his CV to 'Dutch' name or applying to Muslim businesses only. Similarly, when Ghada shared her concerns about her daughter Yasmin, she was advised to confront her daughter's teacher.

The tactics and strategies were common practice. As described in the introduction and Chapter Two, my great aunt's Egyptian husband Paul changed his last name to a more Dutch sounding name so that he and his children would look Dutch on paper too. Mirvat named her two sons Ryan and Adam, which are common names in both the Netherlands and Egypt, and intentionally adopted the Dutch ways of writing these names. Mohamed sent his two sons to a publicly funded Islamic primary school, not necessarily because he wanted his children to receive an Islamic education but rather because he felt his sons' teachers would take him more

seriously as a father. Heba sent her daughter and son to an expensive private school for the same reason. In sharp contrast, other parents categorically refused to adopt these strategies and tactics, arguing that changing names or schools was akin to accepting a second rate citizenship.

In addition, parents sought to motivate their children's teachers to get the best out of their children, for example by trying to talk to them on an almost daily basis, while also pushing their children to do just a little bit better than their 'Dutch' peers. I met parents who tried to talk to their children's teachers every day, often to the chagrin of these teachers. Parents were also constantly looking for additional opportunities for their children. They were particularly interested in additional tutoring, which was generally unavailable unless they were able to pay, which most parents were not. I was often asked to tutor children, and if I felt competent enough, I usually did. I had to turn down a mother who asked me to help her seventeen year old son pass his physics exam, and in turn, she asked me to find another tutor for her, saying that she was willing to pay as much as fifty euros per hour, for four hours a week, which I knew was a considerable chunk of her monthly income.

In Chapter Five, I discuss this emotional and affective labor in more depth. Here, I want to point out that almost none of the parents with whom I worked opted to address racism, because they were not sure how the professionals involved in their lives would respond, and worried that, perhaps, it might harm their relations to them, and thus their children (cf. De Koning and Ruijtenberg, 2022) I say almost, because in May 2017, Ibrahim told me he was going to show his sons' teachers that they were not going to get away with racism.

4.5 How (not) to address racism

In May 2017, I received a phone call from Ibrahim, the husband of Safia, one of the women who attended Karima's workshop. Apparently, their son Karim had come home crying after his teacher had called him stupid. I knew they were racist, he said, shouting through the phone. Ibrahim had a biannual ten-minute parent-teacher meeting scheduled a few days later, which he said provided an excellent opportunity to show them that they would not get away with racism. A few days later, I met Ibrahim and his eighteen year old daughter Hager outside school. Ibrahim had dressed up, wearing a suit and a tie. Hager had come to support her father and brother, she said. I know these people, they are all racists, she said, before we entered the school.

As we entered the classroom, Ms. Jacky and her colleague Ms. Suzanne were already sitting behind their desk. Ms. Suzanne welcomed Ibrahim, telling him that they had missed Karim and hoped that he would return soon. Without wasting much time, Ms. Suzanne moved on

to discuss Karim's latest results, represented in clear-cut, colorful graphs. Karim had improved a little, but not enough to catch up. This was especially disappointing because they had gone out of their way to help Karim, Ms. Suzanne asserted. "We are running out of options here", she said, "so we really hope you will reconsider those tests we talked about before. We believe that this is what is best for Karim. If we run some tests, we know how to help him." "*Taany*" (again), Ibrahim sighed in Arabic, clearly tired of this test that they insisted on and that he had refused to give his consent to several times already.

Then, just before Ibrahim could answer, the school's care-coordinator entered the classroom. Ibrahim had asked her to join in, to lend the meeting some extra weight. "So, what did you want to discuss, sir?" she asked as she sat down. Ibrahim looked at Hager, who nodded reassuringly. Looking down, Ibrahim professed that his son had complained about Ms Jacky. Karim's teachers seemed perplexed, as did the school's care coordinator. Then, after just a second of silence, the care coordinator announced that this was something between Ibrahim and Ms. Jacky, and swiftly left.

As the care-coordinator left the room, Ms. Jacky started her defense: "I really do not know where this is coming from. Sometimes I am strict with him, but he needs that." Hager nodded, commenting that Karim indeed was difficult (*lastig*). But Ibrahim would not let it go: "Okay, but why did you tell him he is stupid and has to re-sit the year," he countered. For a moment, Ms. Jacky seemed taken aback, but her colleague, Ms. Suzanne immediately backed her up, telling Ibrahim that Ms. Jacky was an excellent teacher and she could not imagine her saying something like that to a student.

Quickly moving forward, Ms. Suzanne repeated that they had done everything within their capacity to help Karim, taking the opportunity to mention running a test again. "I understand it is scary, but it is really in his best interest," she assured Ibrahim. Ibrahim once again promised to consider the test, and in an apparent attempt to demonstrate his good intentions, asked if there was anything else he or his wife could do. Ms. Suzanne replied that Karim would really benefit from reading on a daily basis. Visibly relieved, Ibrahim promised that he would personally make sure that Hager would read with her brother, before getting up to shake hands and leave.

Ibrahim and Hager had come in all riled up, but over the course of ten minutes, Ibrahim toned down his rhetoric, from accusing them of racism, to accusing one of them from calling his son stupid and saying that he would have to repeat the year. Still, of all the parents I worked with, he took the most antagonistic approach towards his son's teachers, and they were duly taken aback. However, as soon as they regrouped, they resorted to the language of professional expertise and ethics, while also validating Ibrahim's concerns. In turn, Hager and Ibrahim be-

gan to agree with Karim's teachers. As they continued to express concern at Karim's school results, Hager confirmed that Karim was a difficult child, and Ibrahim said that he would reconsider the test and make Hager read with Karim. For a moment, they seemed to agree, even though they only agreed on the symptoms, not the cause or solution of the problem.

After the meeting, Hager scolded Ibrahim for upsetting Karim's teachers, but Ibrahim was unimpressed. After she stormed off, he said his daughter just felt she knew better because she was born in the Netherlands but she should not forget that he had over twenty years of experience with Dutch ways and knew exactly what he was doing. He knew he could not call them racist to their face, but from their initial silence, he knew his meaning had come across. He seemed to have warmed up a little to Ms. Jacky and Ms. Suzanne, too. He said that Karim was indeed "active" (*actief*) and "not-easy" (*niet makkelijk*), and would be difficult to handle for any teacher. If Ms. Jacky had called him stupid, then that was certainly wrong of her, but it did not make her a bad teacher, he said, at once casting doubt on the incident that had him so riled up in the first place and suggesting that Karim was in good hands after all.

Maybe, Ibrahim had been less certain than he made it seem. If Dutch raceless racism instilled a sense of doubt among parents, then Ibrahim's initial resoluteness may be read as a way to resolve his doubts through action. Or maybe Ibrahim was more ready to be convinced otherwise than he made it seem. If parents narrate migration as a sacrifice for their children, then Ibrahim's readiness to be convinced that his son was in good hands may indicate a certain eagerness to hang on to the idea that his son was heading towards a good or at least better future.

That said, Ibrahim and his wife Safia left open the idea that Karim was in the wrong hands, and in the weeks that followed, he continued to delay consenting to the test, while looking for a new school for Karim. This was also a common strategy: appearing agreeable during the meetings, while refusing to consent to a particular test in order to carve out an alternative pathway of action. In some cases, this worked, but in the case of Safia and Ibrahim, it unfortunately did not. As they went to inquire about the possibility to change schools, Ibrahim and Safia were told that although schools have an obligation to accept pupils if they have space, they were allowed to keep the number of children with special needs to four per class, and since this included children with ADHD and dyslexia, in most cases, schools could thus keep out difficult children. They were never sure whether this was true, and neither was I, but it actually did discourage them from further looking for a school. Instead, they tried to make Hager read with Karim, but she refused, saying that he was impossible to keep calm. After the summer, it appeared that Karim was even further lagging behind, and Ibrahim and Safia could no longer hold off consenting to the test.

To Ibrahim's and Safia's relief, but also disappointment, the test did not reveal any specific needs, leaving him relatively unmarked, but also leaving open the option that his poor results and behavior were due to school, making Ibrahim and Safia feel like they should have done more to find another school for Karim. His teachers still insisted that they could not maintain him in class, and despite the results, Karim was sent to a school for children with special needs. Ibrahim and Safia considered sending him to Egypt, to go stay with his grandparents and attend a private international school, but as far as I know, they never proceeded to do so.

4.6 Removing children

In the Netherlands, as elsewhere, child protection services may remove children from their homes in order to protect them from their parents. In practice, this does not happen often. Still, everyone I met seemed to know of a few cases, and if their own children seemed to be going down the wrong path, the specter of an out-of-home placement came to haunt all their interactions with state actors. In fact, in my reading, this was the main reason why many parents were reluctant to share the more thorny challenges of raising children on limited means, and especially instances of domestic violence.

The people with whom I worked also had the option of sending their children to live with family and go to an (international) school in Egypt, as Ibrahim and Safia were considering. In fact, many of the parents whose children appeared to go down the wrong path told me they were contemplating this, and as I mentioned in the introduction, I worked with one mother who actually did send her son to stay with her brother. These parents were following in the footsteps of a generation of Egyptian parents before them, who had also sent their children to Egypt, raising concerns among Dutch politicians and professionals.

In September 2008, the Amsterdam based newspaper *Het Parool* published an investigative piece on "missing" Egyptian school children from Amsterdam ("*Egyptische jongens van basisscholen zoek*[1]"). According to the piece, at least fifteen Egyptian children of two Islamic primary schools in Amsterdam had not returned after the summer holidays. Instead, their parents had left them with their grandparents in Egypt to attend Egyptian schools. Dutch school attendance officers cited by *Het Parool* came up with a number of explanations. Perhaps these Egyptian parents did not want their children to attend mixed-gender schools or be exposed to the progressive Dutch curricula. Or they sought to avoid the Moroccan parents and Moroccan children who dominate Amsterdam's Islamic institutional infrastructure, including Amsterdam's

[1] https://www.parool.nl/nieuws/egyptische-jongens-van-basisscholen-zoek~b4e8ef25/

Islamic schools. Or Egyptian parents might aim to protect their children from the unsafe space that they apparently perceive Amsterdam to be. Either way, it is commonplace for Egyptian children to be raised by their grandparents, as the Dutch school attendance officer apparently knew.

The case of disappearing Egyptian school children from Amsterdam was quickly brought to the attention of local and national politicians. Fouad Sidali, alderman for education in Amsterdam where the two Islamic schools were located, knew about some school children who had returned. In his interview with *Het Parool*, he cited the example of a boy who had been behind in school when he left Amsterdam, but after attending one of Cairo's private international schools, had managed to get into a Dutch university. Nevertheless, Sidali was alarmed. "They develop a language deficit. And when they return to the Netherlands, their integration process has to start all over again. I believe that if you live in the Netherlands, you should live here with your children"[2], he said. State Secretary of Education Sharon Dijksma was similarly concerned. "As soon as parents withdraw their children from Dutch society, they [the children] miss out on the opportunity to get rooted here. It is a wrong signal, anyway. What does this mean for their integration and their image of Dutch society? They are at a vulnerable age, when you make Dutch friends and when you gradually start thinking about what you want to become in the future. This is where they are confronted with issues that are normal in the Netherlands"[3].

Acting on her concern, Dijksma instigated a formal investigation to get to the bottom of things. According to that study, which was completed in April 2009, some 300 Egyptian children from Amsterdam were attending school in Egypt in the 2008-2009 school year, a significant proportion of the 1200 children from Amsterdam who attend school outside the Netherlands. Most of the 300 Egyptian children were boys, and about half of them went to Egypt before the age of four, and had thus never attended school in the Netherlands. The study also revealed that most of the children eventually return to Amsterdam for educational purposes, just as the boy mentioned by Fouad Sidali had done.

Commenting on the outcome of her investigation, Dijksma declared that Egyptian parents in the Netherlands have a right to send their children to school in Egypt but emphasized that

[2] My translation of: "Ze bouwen een taalachterstand op. En bij terugkeer begint het integratieproces van voren af aan. Ik vind: als je in Nederland woont, woon je hier ook met je kinderen"

[3] My translation of: "Zodra deze ouders hun kinderen aan de Nederlandse samenleving onttrekken, lopen die de kans mis hier te wortelen. Het is hoe dan ook een verkeerd signaal. Wat betekent dit voor hun integratie en hun beeld van de Nederlandse samenleving? Ze zijn op een kwetsbare leeftijd, waarop je Nederlandse vrienden krijgt en langzamerhand bedenkt wat je later wilt worden. Hier worden ze geconfronteerd met zaken die in Nederland gewoon zijn."

she considered the practice "undesirable for society" (*maatschappelijk ongewenst*) because the returning children would come to face a language deficiency (*taalachterstand*) and would find it difficult to (re)connect to Dutch society (*aansluitingsproblemen*). Therefore, she and Amsterdam alderman Lodewijk Ascher were exploring avenues to discourage Egyptian parents from sending their children to Egypt, for example by checking if these parents were actually entitled to child support benefits for children living abroad.

In response to the report filed by Dijksma, *the NRC*, a leading newspaper in the Netherlands, went to talk to Egyptian parents who had actually returned to Egypt with their children. In the interviews, summarized in English in an article published online in November 2009[4], the Netherlands appears as a hostile place, where Egyptian parents' lack the freedom to raise their children according to their own standards. As Adel, a father of four who returned to Egypt after he lost his shawarma business, put it: "In the Netherlands you are not allowed to raise your children in the way you should". Mohamed, another father of four, is more specific when he explains their decision to return to Egypt: "We wanted to be able to step in, forcefully if necessary, but you can't do that in the Netherlands. How can you control your children if you're not even allowed to slap them? My nightmare is to see my 16-year old daughter walk in the door with a boyfriend and not being able to do anything about it". Egyptian parents, and especially fathers, felt haunted by the Dutch authorities. Adel: "If your name is Ahmed or Abdullah, appearances are against you. All it takes is a rumor to have the police or child services knock on your door." Aisha, a Dutch convert, similarly points to Islamophobia to explain her decision to move to Egypt with her husband and children: "We Muslims no longer felt at home in the Netherlands. The last straw was when my neighbors called the police because they said I was abusing my children. At least now my daughter is no longer bullied when she goes to school wearing a headscarf. When I go to the parents' meeting veiled I am respected." Mahmoud, who sent his two youngest children to school in Egypt, takes on a more general racism in Dutch schools: "Children from an immigrant background are almost always directed towards vocational education, even if they do well". When his children finish school, Mahmoud expects them to go to university in Europe or the US.

The pieces by *Het Parool* and the *NRC* evoke static notions of 'culture' and 'religion' as fixed in time and place in order to explain why some Egyptian parents sent their children to grow up in Egypt. Dutch professionals appear to impose their norms and values on migrant parents and their children, for example through the supposedly progressive Dutch curricula or

[4]http://vorige.nrc.nl//international/article2404708.ece/egyptian_parents_dont_want_to_raise_their_children_in_the_netherlands

by criminalizing corporal punishment. Likewise, the attempts by State Secretary Dijksma and Alderman Ascher to discourage parents from sending their children abroad appear as attempts to keep the children 'Dutch'. These attempts, as well as their commentary, also illustrate the moralization (van Houdt and Schinkel 2010) and culturalization of citizenship (Duyvendak et al 2016). In turn, the Egyptian parents cited by the *NRC* appear to reject those norms and values, and leave for Egypt to raise their children where they apparently enjoy the freedom to be the kind of parents they want to be and raise their children the way they want.

Fouad Sidali, cited by *Het Parool*, and some of the parents cited by the *NRC* do bring up Islamophobia and discrimination in the Dutch education system as a reason for parents to leave the Netherlands, but Sidali is quick to mention that the practice nevertheless disturbs him, while the *NRC* merely presents the parents' views without backing them up with the wealth of statistics on discrimination in the Netherlands. Class, or socio-economic circumstances, is only mentioned once, in the case of Adel, who left the Netherlands after he lost his shawarma business, but only as a prelude to discuss the clash of cultures.

In the fall of 2016, I went to Cairo to conduct interviews with Egyptian mothers and their now adult children who had decided to return from the Netherlands to Egypt. The people I met there also mentioned 'culture' and 'religion' to explain why they left, but socio-economic conditions appeared just as pertinent, as did strained family relations. Indeed, while the mothers I talked to mentioned that they did not like who their children were becoming, and feared that they would try drugs and alcohol or give in to other temptations, they also said that their husbands' Dutch incomes provided for a middle-class lifestyle in Egypt that was simply incomparable to the kinds of lives they would have lived in the Netherlands. Moreover, at the time, a Dutch income still sufficed to pay for a private education in Cairo, giving their children access to high quality education, which would give them access to good universities across the world, not just in the Netherlands.

I have not found any evidence for a relation between this curious case and what happened in the years that followed, but soon after, the Dutch government began to invest in policies aimed at countering what it called "child-abductions" and "abandonment" (Mol and Kruger, 2018). This included a new law stipulating that children over twelve years old may legally decide with whom they wish to live post separation, increased means of investigation for the relevant officers, as well as workshops for teachers and other frontline professionals on recognizing the signs of 'abduction' or 'abandonment'[5]. Still, by working with Amira, who eventually sent her fourteen year old son to Egypt, I found that these teachers and frontline workers were not always opposed

[5] https://kinderontvoering.org/

to the idea of sending a child to another country in order to get them on the right path again.

4.7 Amira and Ahmed

I became acquainted with Amira in January 2017, when one of the directors I worked with arranged our introduction, so that she could ask me to accompany her to a meeting with her son Ahmed's mentor and the school's so-called care coordinator (*zorgcoordinator*) the next day. It was the very first week of my fieldwork, and she was the first person who asked me to join her to a meeting like that, so I eagerly agreed. The next morning, on our way to school, Amira began to fill me in on the situation. Apparently, Ahmed had been suspended for a week for throwing a snowball with a stone in it at one of his classmates and, per school policy, Amira and Ahmed had to come in to discuss the incident before Ahmed could return to school. This was the umpteenth time that Ahmed had been suspended, so these meetings were routine for Amira, except this time, the school's care coordinator had urged Amira to reconsider the so-called *uitzoektraject* that she had suggested before, because she no longer thought that maintaining Ahmed at school was feasible, as she put it in her e-mail.

As I later learned, this *uitzoektraject* was an eight week program at a school for children with special behavioral and cognitive needs, designed to identify student's needs and potential, and to decide on the next step in their educational career. Amira had refused to consent to the program before, out of fear that the other children in the program would negatively impact Ahmed's behavior, and more generally, that the program would impede his future opportunities. She had instead tried to enroll Ahmed in psycho-social care through Mounir, their so-called Parent and Child Advisor, who was charged with identifying the family's needs, coordinate between the different care providers, monitor progress, and had a duty to report if a child was in danger. However, Mounir had refused to refer Ahmed, and since Ahmed's teachers continued to suspend him, she understood that she had no choice but to consent to the program, and she had already indicated that in her reply e-mail the day before.

In the year that followed, Ahmed kept on getting in trouble, or making it, depending on whom you would ask, each time triggering more and more invasive welfare interventions. Two weeks after he enrolled in the exploratory program, the program's care coordinator called a meeting with Ahmed, both his parents, and their Parent and Child Advisor. After we had all found a seat, she announced that they would enroll Ahmed in psycho-social care as soon as possible, but that with the way things were looking, they would have no choice but to send Ahmed to School2Care, a school for children with serious problems at home, at school, and in their free

time. And if that did not work out, they would have to consider De Koppeling, a closed youth facility. You really want to avoid that, she told Ahmed.

Afterwards, outside, we were all a little overwhelmed. Amira said she was happy that Ahmed would finally enroll in psycho-social care, but seemed more preoccupied with the prospect of School2Care and especially De Koppeling, because even though she did not know these organizations, from the way the care coordinator had talked about them, she knew they were organizations to be feared. If they take him to prison, we have to take him to Egypt, she said, ostensibly to Mounir, their parent and child advisor, but probably more so to Ahmed's father, Salah, who actually lived in Egypt, and who was visiting the Netherlands for medical reasons. Salah said that he had been saying that forever, and maybe he had, but from the look on Amira's face, it seemed like it was new to her, and it certainly was for me. "Well, take him then," Amira countered. "I will, if I can," Salah said, before turning to Mounir to ask if he could. Mounir nervously explained that, since Ahmed was above twelve years old, he would have to agree. "He won't", Amira announced, before storming off, pulling me with her. As we walked away, Amira told me that she knew for a fact that Ahmed would go to School2Care and then to De Koppeling.

Amira was right: in April, the school's care coordinator announced that they would refer him to School2Care. In the weeks that followed, Amira and Salah focused on preparing Ahmed's move. They talked to family members, arranged a school, and when all else was said and done, bought tickets for the first day of the summer holidays. I asked Amira what they would tell Ahmed, and she said they would tell him he was going on a holiday. As it turned out, Ahmed was over the moon at the prospect of going to the country in which he was born, and where people still wanted him, as he put it.

In June, a good week before the start of the summer holiday, Salah and Ahmed travelled to Egypt. In Egypt, it turned out that, unbeknown to Amira and Ahmed, Salah had married again. His wife apparently had not known about Ahmed either, and actually did not want him in her life. After the first night, Salah dropped him at Amira's brother, who was happy to have him, for the holidays. Amira unsuccessfully tried to persuade her brother to keep Ahmed longer, but by August, she saw no other option than to ask Salah to take Ahmed to Amsterdam, which Salah happily did.

Back in the Netherlands, Ahmed only sporadically went to School2Care. As already described in the Introduction, he instead began to spend his nights out on the street, sometimes returning only early in the morning. If he was at home, he was often aggressive and sometimes even pushed or hit Amira and his younger brothers. On multiple occasions, Amira found large quantities of drugs along with lists of phone numbers, leading her to believe that he was dealing

drugs again. She also found a crowbar, as well as a balaclava, which he claimed were not his.

In the spring of 2018, after many conversations, Amira and Salah agreed that Ahmed could no longer live at Amira's place. Initially, they agreed for Salah to move back to the Netherlands, where he still rented a place, and to take Ahmed in. However, realizing that he was serious, Salah's new wife, who was going to stay in Egypt, reluctantly agreed to take Ahmed in. Amira preferred this option anyway, as it would take Ahmed away from the streets of Amsterdam. Ahmed too agreed, saying that he belonged in Egypt, among people who did not see him as second rate. Amira nevertheless wanted to be sure that she would not get into trouble for it, so she decided to consult Mounir and the child protection officer. To my surprise, they were all open to the idea, and actually came over to Amira's place to meet Salah and ask him questions regarding the living and schooling arrangements. Salah dutifully answered all their questions, and when everyone seemed satisfied, they booked the tickets. Ahmed said he was happy, saying that he was looking forward to a break from everything that was going on in the Netherlands.

Initially, I was surprised that these professionals let Ahmed go to Egypt, but after talking to them later on, when the dust had settled, I understood that they did not think a closed youth facility was a good solution either, not for Ahmed, but definitely not for Dutch society either. They emphasized that troubled youth going into these facilities often came out even more troubled, and that spending some time in another context might not be such a bad idea after all.

4.8 Conclusion: Different but Equal

In this chapter, I explored parenthood as arena in which parents and state-actors negotiate what it means to be different but equal. As parents, the people with whom I worked related to a whole range of organizations and professionals that were new to them. Initially, they projected their hopes onto these organizations and professionals, because even if migration had not brought about the future to which they had once aspired, migration could still be a sacrifice for their children's benefits. However, as their children grew older, my interlocutors became less certain. In addition to fearing that their children could be morally corrupted by Dutch culture, the parents with whom I worked also feared that instead of benefitting their children, the Dutch education system and its representatives would actually work to marginalize their children. At the same time, they were reluctant to adopt racism as an absolute or all-encompassing explanation for how their and their children's lives unfolded in the Netherlands, not necessarily because they wanted to downplay how racism impacts the lives of non-white people in the Netherlands, but rather because to adopt racism as an absolute, all-encompassing explanation was to admit that

their hardship was not a sacrifice, but just that, hardship. Instead, my interlocutors maintained that their children should and could benefit from the Dutch education system and labor markets, and instead mostly asked the question of what to do to keep them on the right trajectory. This kept alive the possibility of a better a future, as well as their sense of purpose in life, but in a way, it also put the onus of children's marginalization on themselves, and stopped a more consistent critical examination of racialization in the Netherlands.

Answering this question of what to do in practice, the people with whom I worked tried to differentiate between better and worse organizations and professionals. Subsequently, they adopted various strategies and tactics to attract the better ones and avoid the worse ones, and to encourage the professionals involved in their children's lives to treat their children as best as they could, or at least as they should. This was relatively easy when their children appeared to be doing well, and as long as that was the case, the work of maintaining good relations with their children's teachers squarely fell on the shoulder of mothers, who found it easier to develop and maintain close relations with professionals, the majority of whom were women too. However, when their children were struggling, as children invariably do at some point, fathers were put forward to show teachers that they would stand their ground. This strategy appeared to have limited effect, in that sense that they often ended up giving consent to the interventions they were trying to prevent. For the parents with whom I worked, out of all the harmful state interventions, the potential of removing children from their parents was the worst. In turn, most of the parents with whom I worked had the option of removing their children from the Netherlands, and outside of the purview of Dutch institutions and professionals.

In Dutch policies, the children of migrant parents are portrayed as trapped in between the parallel worlds of their parents and the society in which they are growing up. Instead, I found that the parents with whom I worked felt caught between the conflicting desires to pinpoint racism and to believe that a better future was still possible. In between these opposing desires, the parents with whom I worked sought to carve out a space in which difference would not automatically mean unequal opportunities, but new opportunities. In the process, they defined the differences between themselves and their children on the one hand, and white Dutch parents and children on the other, but, they could never be sure that their attempts to claim to equal rights were successful.