

DOCUMENTING ATTACHMENT: *Affective border control in applications for family reunification*

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Abstract

From 2002 to 2018, Denmark was the only country in the world to enforce a migration law demanding that couples seeking family reunification in Denmark documented their combined “attachment” to the Danish nation. This article investigates the practice of documenting such national attachment through the so-called “application packets”. Investigating the attachment requirement as a migration political tool with affective investments and implications, we suggest that the documentation process can be understood as a performative process in which the application packets lay out a trajectory of “happy objects” (Ahmed 2010): the application, family reunification, a residence permit and ultimately the nation itself. Although the applicants are urged to orient themselves towards the Danish nation as a happy object with the promise of a possible future in Denmark, this promise may have cruel implications for the applicants. Suggesting that an interdisciplinary meeting point between the fields of migration studies and cultural/discursive studies may form as fruitful, this article invites readers to think about the biopolitics of border control in affective terms

Keywords

Migration management • Biopolitics • Denmark • Happy objects • Cruel optimism

Introduction

Migration politics often seem to presuppose national belonging as a given fact (Yuval-Davis 2011). However, as national belonging seem to denote both a strictly juridical relation and, simultaneously, less definable emotional attachments to a nation, it may be difficult to prove such belonging. How does one document national belonging when that belonging’s juridical sanction is in question? In the following, we invite the reader to think of the

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process of documenting national attachment as a series of performative actions, which constitutes the (possible) national belonging of the subject, rather than verify a pre-existing “truth” of belonging. In other words, we wish to investigate what the documentation of national attachment “does”. Using Danish applications for marriage reunifications as an example, we suggest that the documentation of national attachment may be understood as a demand on the subject to “do belonging” in a particular, affective way. In the case of the Danish attachment requirement, *doing belonging* involves orienting oneself around the Danish nation as a happy object (Ahmed 2010). This article thus explores the affective dimensions of migration management. Focusing on the affective implications of the attachment requirement, this article seeks to shed light on how we might understand the otherwise juridical notion of national attachment (as reflected in the application packets) as affective, and thus how an affect-theoretical framework can contribute to an analysis of the attachment requirement as a biopolitical tool of governmentality (Foucault 2003).¹

A brief history of attachment in Danish migration law

The “attachment requirement” was introduced into Danish law, new Aliens Act of 2000, by a Social Democratic government and tightened and reinforced in 2002 by the then Liberal-Conservative government. The requirement specifically pertained to family reunification and stated that a family could only obtain a legal right to family reunification in Denmark if “the spouses’ or cohabiting partners’ combined attachment to Denmark was stronger than the spouses’ or cohabiting partners’ combined attachment to any other country” (Ministry of Integration 2002 (L152), Section 9, Part 7). In effect, it meant that families in which the parties had resided in Denmark for less than 24 years (later 26 years) applying for reunification were required to prove that their attachment to the Danish nation was greater rather than to any other country. The law never clearly defined what precisely national attachment consisted in (Bissenbakker 2019). Instead, it stated that attachment had to be documented through an assessment of the following: (1) the duration and nature of both spouses’ stays in their respective countries, (2) the Danish resident’s familial attachment to Denmark compared to the non-resident’s home country, (3) both spouses’ Danish-language skills and (4) both spouses’ educational or employment attachment to Denmark (Ministry for Refugees, Immigrants and Integration and Danish Immigration Service 2005).

The concept of “national attachment” was related specifically to migration law and came to play a significant role in the Danish governing of marriage migration, as no major changes in marriage migration law between 2000 and 2018 were made that did not include the attachment requirement. Thus, there has been a strong political consensus around the basic idea of national attachment as a suitable tool to manage marriage migration. When a Liberal-Conservative government joined with its Social Democratic opposition in 2018 to propose that the attachment requirement be discarded, this was not because of political dissatisfaction but because of the European Court of Human Rights had ruled that it was indirectly ethnically discriminating (Bissenbakker 2019; European Court of Human Rights

2016). Although the attachment requirement was officially abandoned, it may be argued that the practice of the law continues through its two legal successors. Namely on the one hand, the “integration demands” (that consists of elements that are almost identical to the demands of the attachment requirement, namely *language skills*, *employment* and *education*) and on the other hand, “The Ghetto Clause” (Ministry of Foreigners and Integration 2018 [L231], 23), by which that marriage reunification cannot occur if the sponsor lives in or moves to an area of Denmark defined by the Minister of Foreigners and Integration as a “ghetto” (ibid.). In many ways, the principles and the discursive logic of national attachment as a precondition for family reunification thus still stand, albeit under a different name (Bissenbakker 2019). It, therefore, continues to be crucial to understand how the documentation of national attachment has regulated marriage migration.

Regulating immigration through family reunification legislation has become an increasingly common practice in Europe, particularly in the Nordic region (Block 2015; Bonjour & Kraler 2015; Fair 2010; Liversage & Rytter 2014; Mühleisen, Røthing & Bang Svendsen 2012; Myrdahl 2010; Rytter 2010; Staver 2014). Although it remains an exceptional case, the specific Danish attachment requirement seems to reflect wider Nordic and European tendencies, as restrictions on family reunification in other European states revolve around similar themes (Block 2015; Staver 2014), that can be understood as part of a practise of “the politics of belonging” (Yuval-Davis 2011). These practices may form as demands on the applicants to prove adherence both to the so-called “majority values” of the nation *and* to (bureaucrats preserved understandings of) the cultural values of the applicants’ country of origin. This is to be the case in the United Kingdom (Wray 2011), Norway (Eggebo 2013) and Finland (Pellander 2015). Although there are many similarities, the Danish attachment requirement seems to rest on a somewhat different premise: namely that the applicant promises to invest their affective interest solely in the Danish nation. Thus, the Danish attachment requirement does function in its own particular way, as a much different handling technique than, for example, the practice of exposing presumed “sham marriages” that has been seen in recent years in the United Kingdom (D’Aoust 2018; Wemyss, Yuval-Davis & Cassidy 2018). Rather than exposing “sham”, the attachment requirement may be understood as a policy instrument that promises to assert the applicants’ “true” belonging to the nation (Bonjour & Kraler 2015; D’Aoust 2013).

Analysing documents as performative and orientational

The application packets concerning family reunification of spouses are a central component of the Danish Immigration Service’s migration-administrative system. As such, they constitute an interesting and relevant (if overlooked) empirical material for governmentality studies on love migration and family reunification, as they can help us to understand how attachment affectively regulates family reunification. The application packets that we investigate may be considered as part of a general European practice of pre-entry tests that can be characterized as having “less to do with integration than with a desire to reduce the

flow of marriage migrants or to raise their human capital” (Kofman, Saharso & Vacchelli 2015). Although some scholars have looked at emotional work done by bureaucrats within the marriage migration system (Eggebo 2013) or their assessment and management of the applicants’ emotions (Pellander 2015), less attention has been given to how applications in themselves may be said to do affective “work”. In addition, research on the Danish attachment requirement tends to focus on the structural and/or personal effects of the legislation (Block 2015; Bech & Mouritsen 2013; Olsen, Liisberg & Kjærsum 2004; Rytter 2010; Schultz-Nielsen and Tranæs 2009; Staver 2014). Only a few researchers have made the application packets’ legal documents themselves an object of study. Notable exceptions are Moeslund and Strasser (2008), Lund Pedersen (2012) and Bak Jørgensen (2013). In their comparative study on family migration policies in nine European countries, Moeslund and Strasser analyse the processing (time) of applications for family reunification of spouses. In this study, the application packets are used as empirical material in an analysis of how the Danish authorities understand and assess “true” marriages contra “pro-forma” or forced marriages (Moeslund & Strasser 2008: 21). Lund Pedersen takes the application packets and the legal definitions of the requirements on family reunification of spouses as examples of “how Danishness can overlap with whiteness and how race privileges may present as unarticulated and qualifying norms in the application process” (Lund Pedersen 2012: 141). Taking the attachment requirement as an example of the policies on marriage migration, Bak Jørgensen includes one of the application packets in his analysis of how this legal document may change “the status for a migrant marrying a Danish permanent resident” (Bak Jørgensen 2013: 73).

While these investigations offer crucial perspectives on how the application packets understand “true” national attachment and sort applicants accordingly, we believe that the application packets may also offer insights into the workings of the affective biopolitics of migration. This is a perspective that tends to get lost in the research, where the packets are viewed mainly as sorting mechanisms. Instead, we seek to investigate the application packets as discursive material. This does not mean that the packets do not function as selection mechanisms. However, we seek to examine the documentation of national attachment from a discourse analytical perspective (Foucault 2003; Laclau & Mouffe 2001 [1985]). Adopting a discourse analytical approach to the study of legal documents thus means that we are interested in the documentary practices relating to family reunification “and the possibilities offered by an ethnographic approach to documents” (Posocco 2011: 1–2). This perspective has implications for how we view legal documents and application packets and how we investigate the affective logics and inner workings of the packets: As Lise Justesen suggests, legal documents are by no means just passive, dead objects. Not only do they constitute concrete material entities “because of their textuality and their concrete physical form, whether they are written on paper or as a file on a computer” (Justesen 2005: 215, authors’ translation) but they must be understood as *performative* (Dahler-Larsen 2005: 244–245; Justesen 2005: 222; Posocco 2011: 5) because they *do* something, besides documenting. Following these points, we do not seek to investigate how the application packets “represent” or “describe” applying couples’ national attachment as a pre-discursive

fact. Rather, we investigate the application packets as (legal) discourses that performatively act. As Faber, Hjort-Pedersen, Madsen and Tournay argue – paraphrasing philosopher of language J. L. Austin (1962) – performative utterances “do something to something through being vocalized and therefore establish a fact in the world that was not there before the utterance was vocalized” (Faber *et al.* 1998: 13, authors’ translation). In this sense, the application packets can be seen as performative in different ways. Not only do they have the aforementioned power to act by changing a subject’s legal status (Bak Jørgensen 2013: 73; Posocco 2011: 11) but also the performativity of the documents may pertain to the very thing they are thought to document. Hence, documentation of a national attachment may be thought of as one of the processes by which attachment is performed and nationhood maintained. In this case, how the documents construe the nation as a happy object.

The analytical strategy we employ to study the documents is inspired by anthropologist Silvia Posocco (2011). Posocco (2011: 11), also drawing on Austin, points to adoption files (*expedientes*) as “complex, composite, and internally differentiated documents, which at once interrupt and establish relationships”. In this case, *expedientes*, as Posocco (2011) demonstrates, interrupt and establish (juridical) relationships between the birth mother, adoptee and adoptive parent(s). Inspired by Posocco’s ethnographic approach to analysing legal documents, the article focuses on the performativity of application packets documenting attachment. Although Posocco offers a methodology for investigating how documents circulate in the administrative system, we sidestep the question of circulation to focus on how the affective-performative practices of the application packets function at a textual level.

Using a text-based and affect-theoretical discourse analytical approach to the application packets, our reading of the documents is inspired by Sara Ahmed’s concept of *orientation* (Ahmed 2007). We argue that how transnational couples must document (or establish) national attachment in the application packets is instructive for thinking about what national attachment is imagined to be. Thus, we are interested in how one may think about the performativity of attachment documentation in affective terms. In this regard, the article neither seeks to prove that national attachment is “actually” performative nor does it claim that the orientation towards Denmark as a happy object in fact makes (or fails to make) subjects “happy”. Rather we aim to illustrate how a reading of the documentation of national attachment as performative and orientational may enable us to understand some of the affective aspects of the biopolitics (Foucault 2003) of marriage migration law. In the following section, we present the theoretical framework used in the analysis and discuss how this can contribute to our analysis of the application packets.

Orientation and happy objects

To shed light on the attachment requirement “as a tool of assessment that may describe the current quality of a family unit’s ties to a nation”, as well as a governmental technology that “demands unambiguity and one-directionality” of such ties (Myong & Bissenbakker

forthcoming), we turn to Sara Ahmed's (2004, 2007, 2010) work on emotions. In particular, we suggest that the understanding of the performative practices of the attachment documentation may benefit from Ahmed's (2010) (queer) phenomenological-performative approach to the analysis of emotions. In *The Promise of Happiness* (Ahmed 2010), she reflects on *happiness* as an imperative, a promise that drives and directs subjects. Rather than developing a definition of what happiness *is*, Ahmed is interested in what happiness *does* (Ahmed 2010: 2). Traditionally, emotions, such as happiness, are understood as autonomous and self-contained, as a state that subjects can "be in". Ahmed, however, both critiques and builds on this specific notion of happiness, suggesting that although we may be used to thinking about happiness as "a feeling-state, or a form of consciousness that evaluates a life situation we have achieved over time", we may also understand it as something that "turns us towards objects" (Ahmed 2010: 21). Building on the phenomenological concept of "intentionality", Ahmed suggests that happiness can be thought of as directing us towards certain objects we imagine as "happy" and capable of making us happy. She argues that while we can certainly be happy *about* something – a happy object – in the present, "some things become happy *for us*, if we imagine they will bring happiness *to us*" (Ahmed 2010: 26). Therefore, happiness is often understood as a "destination", an endpoint one may strive for and hope to arrive at. In other words, the promise of happiness points into the future as an end we wish to achieve. As Ahmed (2010: 32) suggests, happiness can be seen as "a question of following rather than finding":

The promise of the object is always in this specific sense ahead of us; to follow happiness is often narrated as following a path [...], such that if we follow the path we imagine we will reach its point. (Ahmed 2010: 32)

Thus the object, as the expected cause of happiness, is always ahead of us, waiting in the future, if we follow certain paths. This is why, according to Ahmed, happiness is not really something we can find, but rather a question of following. If we follow certain paths (or: so we are led to believe), happiness is what awaits us at the paths' end: "This is why happiness is crucial to the energy or 'forward direction' of narrative" (Ahmed 2010: 32). The promise of happiness functions as a narrative that orientates subjects towards objects perceived to bring happiness for the subjects in the future:

Happiness is what would come after. Given this, happiness is directed toward certain objects, which point toward that which is not yet present. When we follow things, we aim for happiness, as if happiness is what you get if you reach certain points. (Ahmed 2010: 26)

Ahmed suggests that we think of expectations of happiness as narratives that come to shape our ideas of the future (Ahmed 2010: 28–29). Happy objects, as objects we are directed towards in the pursuit of happiness, can be ideas and abstract objects (such as values, practices and aspirations) as well as concrete things. In principle, any object may become elevated to (and thus analysed as) a happy object (just as anything may be viewed as a sign,

a discourse or a relation of power). It is a case in point that our ideas and ideals of happiness are seldom our “own”. Often, they constitute implicit demands put on us. Therefore, the happiness analysis does not seek to determine whether an object does indeed bring about happiness. Rather, it investigates how an object becomes invested with happiness, and what the structural effects of this investment are.

Ahmed refers to happy objects as “gap-fillers” (Ahmed 2010: 32). Imaging objects as potential causes of happiness makes them forms of “props” to us (Ahmed 2010: 32). Ahmed uses “the happy family” as an example of a happy object that not only affects us emotionally but also becomes in itself an object we are directed towards and circulate through. The happiness of the family as an object depends on yet other happy objects, such as the family photo album or the dinner table. Pictures of the happy family are not only happy objects themselves, but they also constitute the family as happy (Ahmed 2010: 45):

This orientation toward the family is what makes certain objects proximate (tables, photographs, and other objects that secure family intimacy), as the objects through which the family itself become [sic] given. (Ahmed 2010: 46)

Thus, it is the orientation towards the family, which makes other (happy) objects reachable for us.

In the following sections, we apply the concepts of orientation and happy objects to the application packets. Although it is tempting to follow Ahmed’s example and think of “the family” as the happy object in the family reunification process, as we will suggest, the application packets seem to construct other kinds of objects as the preferred happy objects of the application process. Indeed, one may think of the application packets as central components in constructing narratives about happiness, as they promise to plot a happy course that will enable the subject to achieve family reunification in Denmark. Following Ahmed, we do not seek to investigate the emotions of applying couples – or whether or not the prospect of a residence permit will “actually” make them happy. Instead, Ahmed’s conceptualization of happiness offers a way to understand the application packets as affectively invested legal documents that can be seen as happy objects that at the same time promise to make a series of objects happy reachable for the applicants.

National attachment as orientation: A trajectory of happy objects

To obtain a residence permit for the applicant, couples had to use one of what the Danish Immigration Service termed “application packets” to apply for family reunification. The application packets that comprise our empirical material were in use until the change of Danish family reunification law in June 2018, and they constituted the main basis for the Danish Immigration Service’s evaluation of a couple’s attachment, as all other documentation had to be attached to them as validation of the couples’ answers in the

application. Applicants for family reunification had to obtain the application packets from the website of the Danish Immigration Service (Ny i Danmark [New to Denmark] 2018a, b), from where we also retrieved them. Couples who applied for family reunification of spouses had to choose between two application packets, depending on whether or not the sponsor² was a Danish/Nordic citizen or had a residence permit in Denmark on other grounds than asylum (FA1), or had a residence permit on the grounds of asylum (FA10).

The two application packets are fairly similar, both in terms of their structure and the questions they contain.³ Both contain two forms: Form 1 is to be filled out by the applicant and Form 2 is for the sponsor. Generally, however, Form 2 is longer than Form 1, suggesting that there are more questions for the sponsor than for the applicant. This particularly pertains to the documentation of attachment, which is evaluated through different criteria in the two forms. As regards the applicant, their degree of attachment is mainly evaluated through their visits to Denmark in comparison to their attachment to other countries (thus they must provide documentation for any periods of residence in other countries than their country of origin, and any residence permits they may have for Denmark or another country). For the sponsor, the documentation of their Danish attachment falls into two parts: Sections 8.A and 8.B. The questions in Section 8.A ask for information about their place of birth and upbringing, whether they have Danish citizenship (and if so when they obtained it), travels outside of Denmark, and finally, information about the partner's family relations: their parents (names, address and birthdays) and siblings in and outside of Denmark (names, address, birthdays and marital status). Section 8.B contains questions about socioeconomic circumstances such as employment and education.⁴

Although it is the couples' combined attachment to Denmark that determines whether the application will be approved, it is worth noting that the spouses' individual attachments are also taken into account, and that the predominant burden of documenting national attachment falls on the Danish resident. Most of the questions on the forms are standardized and only require ticking yes/no boxes. If a question is answered with a "yes", the next section requests a brief elaboration, or the applicant is asked to attach documentation to support their answer, for example, a residence permit. Even the questions that do not ask for yes/no-responses can only be answered with short and information-based type answers. The application packets thus seem to presuppose that attachment is something both the applicant and the sponsor either have or do not have, and therefore can document in the application packets.⁵ The documentation may consist of visits to Denmark, proof of citizenship, family relations as well as socioeconomic criteria such as employment and education (for the sponsor).

As such, no questions explicitly address and seek to assess the applicants' emotional belonging understood as their feelings towards Denmark. The affective component of the documentation process, we argue, must be understood differently, namely as a set of affective implications that underpin the idea of attachment as a social and legal fact. Following Ahmed's (2004) conceptualization of the nation as "a concrete effect of how some bodies have moved towards and away from other bodies, a movement that works to create boundaries and borders, and the 'approximation' of what we can now call 'national

character' (what the nation *is like*)" (Ahmed 2004: 133), we can understand the nation as a product of such (re)orientation of bodies. With Ahmed, we can read the attachment requirement as an (affective) orientation device that directs subjects towards the nation. Specifically, we can think of attachment as a concept that orients the subjects towards the nation as an object to strive for. If "happiness" can be thought of as whatever constitutes the expected endpoint of the application process, happiness is here the object "waiting on the horizon", directing the application process. In this case, the happy object on the horizon is obviously family reunification, but it is also the Danish nation, as it is proximity (attachment) to this object that will put family reunification in reach. Even when the possibility of not having attachment is mentioned in the application (to which we will return), the nation still figures as an object the applicant must be (re-)orientated towards.

The application packets can be said to performatively construe the nation as the happy object, which the couple must prove themselves to be oriented towards to obtain family reunification. This can also be seen in the definition of the attachment requirement in the Danish immigration law. As Bissenbakker (2019) argues, the implementation of the attachment requirement in 2000–2002 marked a shift in Danish immigration law, by which the applicant was now obliged to document attachment to the Danish nation as the object of attachment (rather than their spouse) to obtain a residence permit. Thus, attachment, before it was configured into a requirement in 2000, pertained to a subject's family relations before it denoted national relations. With Ahmed in mind, we can see the implementation of the attachment requirement as an orientation away from the family to the Danish nation.

In terms of the application process, we may understand the application packets as laying out a *trajectory of happy objects*. The application packets are happy objects in the sense that they are objects that promise happiness (in the form of family reunification) for the couple if they can submit a "correct" application. The application packets put the couple on a specific path towards obtaining family reunification by demanding proof of an orientation towards the nation as the ultimate happy object. Similarly to the way in which the family photo album is both a happy object in itself simultaneously as it construes the family as a happy object (Ahmed 2010: 45–6), the application packets themselves become happy objects at the same time as they are devices that construct and maintain the nation as the couple's ultimate happy object. The application packets introduce a new (happy) object: the residence permit, waiting on the horizon, once the application has been filled out and submitted to the Danish Immigration Service. The application promises the residence permit, which, in turn, promises to bring the couple (especially the applicant) closer to family reunification and to the nation as a happy object. Attachment to the nation is both the precondition for obtaining a residence permit and its end goal, as the permit promises to bring the applicants closer to the nation as their happy object.

Happiness thus circulates between different objects: the application packet, the residence permit, family reunification and the Danish nation. In this sense, we might think of the different happy objects like a chain of signs, where one sign seems to lead to the next in line. However, rather than constituting a "chain of equivalence" (Laclau & Mouffe 2001 [1985]: 127–134) there seem to be significant differences between these objects. As happy

objects, the application packets and the residence permit come off as tangible objects that the applicants may reach for and hold in their hands, so to speak. The nation, on the other hand, figures as an abstract and imagined happy object (as the possible end of the chain), which the couple is directed towards through the attachment requirement.

Future attachment as future happiness: a case of cruel optimism?

National attachment can be thought of as the orientation towards the nation as a happy object: Denmark is the object that promises happiness if it is reached. Belonging to the nation is at the end of the path for couples whose national attachment can be recognized by the Danish Immigration Service. This presupposes the existence of certain other couples, to whom a future in Denmark becomes potentially unreachable.⁶ As mentioned, *the future* is central in Ahmed's (2010) theory on happiness as orientation, as she suggests that the promise of happiness orientates subjects in a forward movement towards an imagined happy future (Ahmed 2010: 32). According to Ahmed, happiness is understood as the object that awaits on the horizon. Through this line of thinking, we can understand the attachment requirement as a happy object that directs subjects towards an imagined happy future.

Time – or more precisely, the future – is not only a key component in the application packets but also in the application process as such. Temporality is not only a key factor in a Danish context. Generally, temporality and time seem to be central components in the regulation of migration to Europe.⁷ Pellander (2015: 1482) identifies temporality as “an inextricable part of the way marriages are evaluated” in a Finnish context. Pellander (2015: 1482) also emphasises that the “point at which the marriage is evaluated and the slowness of the juridical process change the assessment of marriages”. Time thus functions as a key component in the administrative management of marriage migration. In a Danish context, Bak Jørgensen (2013: 73) emphasizes that an application for family reunification of spouses may be a lengthy process, as the application can be either denied or approved for further review. If the case is accepted for further processing, the Danish Immigration Service may demand more documentation or call the applicants in for a follow up interview. The latter is only procedure if the authorities suspect the marriage or cohabitating relationship to not be “credible” (Dilou Jacobsen & Vedsted-Hansen 2017: 518–519). That a follow-up interview is not a common procedure in the evaluation of the attachment requirement might suggest that the attachment requirement (compared to the evaluation of couples' relationships) is expected to be easier to document through the packets and thus does not need to be reviewed through a follow-up interview. This suggests that national attachment is understood to be more “concrete” or “quantitative” in “nature” than a marriage or cohabitating relationship. Returning to the question of temporality in relation to the application process, Lund Pedersen (2012) adds to Bak Jørgensen's description by recounting the frustration that she experienced in relation to her own family reunification application as follows:

The intimacy I had felt with the Danish state through the application has been a stressful period. One could never be sure that you had fulfilled the right criteria and for the period of the process my partner was stripped of rights to participate in the Danish society which left him in limbo. (Lund Pedersen 2012: 154)

When initiating the process of applying for family reunification of spouses, the process may seem to be a forward directing “path”: one fills out the application forms, securing the right documentation to go along with the forms, submits the application and then finally (and hopefully) gets an approved application and a residence permit for the applicant. However, both Bak Jørgensen and Lund Pedersen point to the application process as quite a different experience – a less transparent and not quite as straightforward a narrative to go through for the applicants. Indeed, the application process might be experienced as a state of “limbo”, as Lund describes her and her partner’s situation. In other words, the applicants may find themselves in a continuous state of waiting. They might be on their way towards an imagined happy future of family reunification, but may also be stuck waiting for the Danish Immigration Service’s verdict on their case. In this case, happiness becomes an imagined or promised future, which guides the couple through the application process without them knowing whether or not they will succeed. Both the application packets and the application process thus push the promise of happiness into the future as something potentially (un)reachable.

As happy national attachment becomes a possibly unreachable endpoint (which the couple is expected to strive for, but may never be able to reach), the attachment requirement reveals itself as a promise that may have cruel implications for applying couples. To unpack the limits of the promise of attachment, we turn to Laurent Berlant’s (2006, 2011) concept of “cruel optimism”. Whereas Ahmed focuses on the imperative of happiness and how it directs subjects towards certain objects, Berlant is interested in optimism as a feeling that directs subjects. Like happiness, optimism can drive us towards desired objects, but optimism may have cruel implications for the subjects involved. Berlant sees optimism as a “cluster of promises” (Berlant 2006: 20; Bruun Eriksen 2017: 117) structuring our interest and engagement with certain objects. To get near a certain object is to get near that which the object is promising us (Berlant 2006: 20). Like happiness, however, optimism drives subjects in a forward direction towards desired objects. According to Berlant, all attachments are optimistic, but fortunately, they are not all necessarily cruel. Berlant (2006: 21) thus uses the term “cruel optimism” to designate “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility”. In other words, optimism becomes cruel when an object you desire becomes “an obstacle to your flourishing” (Berlant 2011: 1; Bruun Eriksen 2017: 117).

The application packets (and the application process) may be seen as an example of such “compromised conditions of possibility”, that is, as a cruel relation to the nation as the desired object. This becomes apparent when looking at a peculiar question in the last part of Form 2, which stands out compared to the rest of the forms. Appearing in the section on attachment at the end of Section 8.B on employment and education, the section reads:

If you do not have a job in Denmark or have not taken/[are] taking an education in Denmark, you must inform if you have another connection to Denmark. If you do not have this, you must inform why not. (FA1: 22; FA10: 22)

The two-part question (which essentially takes the form of a demand) is to be answered by the partner already living in Denmark. This part of the application packet stands out from the structure of the rest of the application packets for two reasons. First, it is one of few “open” questions which are not structured around predefined and standardized answers. Instead, there is a blank space, inviting the partner to provide a (short) answer. In other words, the first part of the question indirectly invites the partner to reflect on what might constitute an acceptable obstacle for attachment. Second, the subsequent part of the question is the only question in both application packets which opens for the possibility of the partner not having – and therefore, not being able to document – national attachment. The rest of the application packets construe attachment to the nation as more of a pre-existing fact, which both the applicant and their partner are expected to already have and therefore be able to document in the application (or possible to not have and therefore not be able to document).

By allowing for the possibility that the partner in Denmark may document and establish attachment through criteria other than the predefined socioeconomic criteria of employment, education etc., this section thus suggests an alternative understanding of attachment as a question of the partner’s *ability* or *potentiality* to gain attachment to the nation in the future. Identifying an external obstacle that has prevented attachment, the partner may point away from themselves as the “obstacle”. This suggests that the partner might not have national attachment in the present, but he or she could be able to obtain attachment in the future. Here the nation is underlined as a happy object, which may be unreachable in the present, but which promises happiness if it is reached in the future. Depending on their answer, the partner thus gets a chance to become *reoriented* towards the nation. Though the partner might not be able to document attachment to the nation through the predefined criteria, these additional “questions” at least suggest an optimistic hope for future family reunification of the spouse, as the partner is given an opportunity to either document attachment through other criteria or identify a reason for not having national attachment in the present moment. The section that suggests the possibility of not having attachment thus simultaneously functions as a promise of obtaining future attachment. The possibility of getting a residence permit for the applicant seems still to be on the horizon.

Even though the final section of Form 2 opens up the possibility of either establishing attachment through other criteria or establishing a potential to achieve national attachment in the future, this “last chance” reads as a perfect example of cruel optimism. Not only is there no guarantee that the Danish Immigration Service will recognize the self-reported criteria as attachment, or that they will recognize the potential for attachment through an identification of a reason for missing attachment to Denmark, it is not clear exactly what the applicant is being asked or what answering will do. The partner is thus given a final chance to document their potential of attachment, but at the same time, it is unclear how they are to take advantage of this chance, as there are no instructions as to what might be recognizable as a potential for attachment in the eyes of the Danish Immigration Service.

For example, voluntary work could be a possible answer one might give to the two-part question as a sign of national attachment. However, as a case from 2016 from the website of the Immigration Appeals Board shows, voluntary work does not count as a sign of sufficient attachment in the eyes of the Danish Immigration Service or the Immigration Appeals Board as the latter has decided to affirm the initial rejection. It is stated in the decision of the appeal that the sponsor's voluntary work of 2 years "has not been to an extent and nature that it can be equate to the attachment and integration one can achieve in relation to taking an education or being employed in Denmark" (Immigration Appeals Board 2019, author's translation). Thus, voluntary work is not recognizable as a sign of a strong national attachment to Denmark compared to employment or a Danish education, which it is "measured" against.

Returning to the two-part question in the application packets, it is unclear whether these "questions" will make its happy objects (a residence permit and the nation) come closer to the couple. Will it put the happy objects in reach? Or will it push them further out into the horizon? Indeed, the nation seems more in reach for some applying couples than others. As mentioned, Lund Pedersen (2012) has examined how "Danishness" is intertwined with "whiteness" in the application packets for family reunification. Following Lund's analysis, the Danish nation seems in reach for certain white bodies than for other non-white bodies. However, whiteness is not the only "component" in the workings of the attachment requirement. As Lund Pedersen (2012: 152) also points out, "The attachment requirement hints at what normative aspiration we seem to be driven towards. Even if the sponsor already is a Danish national it would appear insufficient to merely have a formal membership of the state, some cultural bonds also need to be in place". Similarly, Rytter (2010: 306) shows (through a case taken from Olsen, Liisberg & Kjærum 2004) "how Danish citizens with parents originating in another country have a hard time fulfilling the requirement of national attachment, because they lack a long family history and genealogy related to Denmark". Thus, other affiliations to the Danish nation such as family relations and a family genealogy together with "cultural bonds" also function as "signs" that put the happy objects in reach for certain applying couples while pushing them further out of reach for others who might "lack" these affiliations.

Concluding remarks: Governing love migrants through the promise of happiness

The criteria for being nationally attached were – and continue to be – related to socioeconomic features such as employment and education. As a mode of belonging, however, attachment may also be thought of as affective. As Yuval-Davis (2011) suggests, the experience and political framing of national belonging must be understood as connected to different emotional aspects, such as feelings of nostalgia or obligation; or, as Ahmed suggests (2004), of love, pride or even shame regarding the nation. What is significant about the Danish attachment requirement is that it did not simply ask the applicants to pledge allegiance to the Danish nation. Nor did it purport to definitively test an applicant's emotional ties to,

loyalty towards or love for Denmark. Instead, transnational couples were asked to *document* their attachment to Denmark through a series of questions and explanations in an online application packet. We argue that the practice of documentation may be understood as an orientation device. Investigating the application packets for family reunification of spouses using the affect-theoretical concepts of happiness and cruel optimism may shed light on how to understand application processes and national attachment requirements as affective. Thus, this article offers an example of how an affective analysis may contribute to new insights into how the requirement to be nationally attached functions as an (affective) governmentality instrument. Understanding the family reunification application packets as happy objects, which direct the love migrants towards the nation and construct the nation as a happy object invites readers to conceptualize and reflect upon the biopolitical regulation of love migration in affective terms. We may indeed think of this affective practice as part of a disciplinary process (in the Foucauldian sense of the word),⁸ in which love migrants must promise to accept the Danish nation as their preferred happy object. Thus, our point is not to prove that the attachment requirement and its documentation are affective as opposed to “objective” or “fair”. Rather, the article is an invitation to think of the biopolitical process of migration management as a form of border control that works through affective components.

The Danish attachment requirement is now officially a matter of history, as new the Aliens Act of 2018 has overturned the requirement and replaced it by an “integration requirement” consisting of a set of demands on both the sponsor and the applicant (Ministry of Foreigners and Integration 2018, L231). Whether the documentation of “integration” will take place along the same lines as the documentation of “attachment” remains to be seen. In any case, understanding the recent history of the attachment requirement is crucial to investigating the ongoing history of regulating marriage migration through the documentation of belonging. We argue that an investigation of such practices will benefit from considering the affective perspectives of such documentation.

Notes

1. This article is part of the Loving Attachment: Regulating Danish Love Migration (LOVA) research project, funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research. LOVA investigates how and to what effect the concept of attachment has been operationalized to regulate different forms of family migration in a Danish context from 2000 to 2018.
2. We use the terms “partner” or “sponsor” to denote both spouse and cohabitating partner, which are the two terms used in the application packets.
3. A notable difference between the two application packets is Attachment 3, which is only found in the FA1 packet. This is the only part of the application packet, which is solely in Danish, even in the English version of the application packet (FA1), which may be understood as an implicit language test.
4. According to the memorandum entitled Notes on the Application of the Attachment Requirement in Spouse Family Reunification (2005), the couple’s language skills in

- Danish are also included in the evaluation of the couple's attachment, though this criterion is not included in the sections on attachment in the application packets.
5. On national attachment as a pre-existing fact versus a processual ideal, see Bissenbakker (2019).
 6. Many of these will be couples where the applicant does not have an ethnic Danish background; cf. Block (2015).
 7. Temporality and "waitinghood" are central components in the governing of irregular migration to Europe; see e.g. the WAIT project (available from: <https://www.uib.no/en/project/wait>).
 8. Cf. Foucault 1978, 2003.

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