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The park near the Gare de l'Est: 'Just waiting to go, to move on'**Liza Schuster**Department of Sociology, City University, London, UK, Email: l.schuster@city.ac.uk

Introduction

Dotted around Paris are dozens of small green spaces where mothers bring their children, the elderly come to sit on benches in the sun, and teenagers loll, whiling away boring hours with nothing much to do. Since the closure of the camp at Sangatte near Calais in 2002, a couple of these parks near the Gare de l'Est and the Gare du Nord have become temporary homes to around one hundred young men, though the numbers fluctuate considerably during the year. The park lies in Paris's 10th arrondissement in which there is a high proportion of socially disadvantaged families and a significant number of homeless people (*Sans Domiciles Fixe – SDF*), but which is also home to the French equivalent of yuppies (*Bourgeois-Bohemian – BoBos*), all of whom use the park.

The exiles of the 10th arrondissement, as they have become knownⁱ, are in Paris for different reasons: a few are waiting to hear the response to their asylum claim; others are waiting for money from friends or family so that they can continue their journey (because they have already had their claim rejected in France, or because they don't want to claim because they know or believe they have little chance of being granted permission to stay, or because they have been returned to France by another European Union Member State (MS), usually Germany or the UK); others are looking for work to earn money to continue their journey, others are waiting for information that will help them decide what they should do next.

During the summer of 2008, as France took over the presidency of the EU with plans to streamline asylum and immigration policy (Council of European Union 2008), I began volunteering with one of the groups that seek to support the exiles from Afghanistan and witnessed their 'waiting'. The exiles are forced to wait, deprived of the *right* to act, by the Dublin Convention which assigns responsibility for examining the claim of an asylum seeker to particular states, but which is used by states to evade that responsibility. Nonetheless, burdened frequently by family responsibilities, the exiles seek to negotiate these rules, wanting to be allowed to take responsibility for themselves, wanting to work and to earn money. They are supported in this quest by individuals and associations who take responsibility for providing food, providing information and watching out for them, by monitoring the behaviour of the police and public authorities, for example. However, the ability of these individuals and bodies to take responsibility for some of the exiles, the younger ones in particular, is circumscribed by French law.

The Exiles

The exiles spend their days resting in the park or along the Canal St Martin, just beside the park, trying to find work, or waiting for phone calls from those who might have something (information, money, news) for them. Others go to the library, where they can occasionally use the internet. In the evening they wait near the food distribution points, before moving on to the bus stop to wait for the emergency accommodation. Finally, a number will return to the streets around the park to wait until it is locked for the night and they can slip in under, over or through the bars. Only a handful of the exiles speak French, although most are anxious to learn, asking for books and tapes. Quite a few speak limited to good English; many speak some Greek, having spent between two weeks and 18 months in Greece en routeⁱⁱ. The first languages of the exiles are mainly Dari, Pashto and Pharsee, though some also have Uzbek or Tajik as first languages, reflecting their varied ethnic groups.

The exiles are overwhelmingly young men. Their ages range from about 13 to 30, with occasionally an older man or a family appearing. It is very difficult for a single woman to travel outside the community in Afghanistan, and single women, families and young children are, compared with single young men, found accommodation relatively quickly in Europe. Young men, assumed to be able to look after themselves are expected to fend for themselves in the public spaces they are obliged to appropriate in the absence of private spaces.

The population of exiles changes every day as people arrive and depart. Some have just completed for the first time the long journey from Afghanistan via Iran, Turkey, Greece and Italy. Others are making a second journey from Afghanistan, having made it to an EU country, and having been through an asylum process in another EU Member State (MS) but been deported back to Afghanistan. Still others are returning to Paris, having been deported to Greece, or occasionally Italy, their first point of entry to the EU. Some have been returned to France from Germany or from the UK, and of these, some are determined to return to the UK (even some who have previously been deported from the UK to Afghanistan), others now want to try somewhere else. Still others are in the French asylum system, and are entitled to accommodation, but are waiting for a place to become available.

The exiles are trapped in a web of EU and national bureaucracy, policy and regulations, a labyrinth from which there appears to be no escape. The way in which these operate is explored in more detail later in the article. A testament to the complexity of European asylum regimes is the lack of understanding displayed by most of the exiles about how the system works – even when they have already been through that system. One exile that had applied for asylum in the UK, and had his case rejected, was in Paris having returned from Afghanistan, trying to decide where to go next, unable to believe that his fingerprints would follow him wherever he went in Europe. Most find it difficult to distinguish between the different statuses and papers required, confusing a passport with refugee status with compassionate or humanitarian leave to remain. The different documents they are given are rarely – contrary to European guidelines – translated into a language they understand. The organizations are overstretched and few have the time or the language

skills to explain to exiles what the different pieces of paper mean. The strangeness of this system and the difficulties in orientating oneself is inevitably compounded by language difficulties all of which combine to exclude the exiles from 'the system' and French society.

The enforced boredom and frustration for this group is debilitating. In Afghanistan, many of these young men have worked and contributed to their families from their early years. Even the youngest has made an exhausting journey, demanding high levels of resilience and resourcefulness. They are used to having a role, to taking responsibility for themselves and their families. Among the exiles are traders, teachers, students, mechanics, laborers, farmers and chefs. All are desperate to work and or study, all resent this period of enforced idleness, their dependence on handouts and being grouped together with those who cannot fend for themselves. Here in Paris, they have been made redundant, useless. They may still be needed at 'home' (though life there is continuing without them), but here in Europe they are treated as a burden, something that, once it can no longer be ignored, should be disposed of as quickly as possible. As one of the exiles pointed out to me, this was not what they expected of Europe, cradle of human rights. They expected to be treated with respect, as human beings, not to be turned into 'ping pong balls'.

Unaccompanied Minorsⁱⁱⁱ

The number of children among the exiles is relatively high^{iv}. Each evening through the summer there would be a handful of new arrivals. In theory, once the authorities have been alerted to the presence of a minor, they become the responsibility of the state, a responsibility delegated to, for example, FTDA. FTDA have a section charged with looking after minors, including finding places for them in hostels. They also run a number of small reception centres. However, there is a real shortage of places and each night over the summer the number of minors sleeping in the open^v varied from six to fifteen, although *in theory* this should not happen, as the French *Code Penal* prohibits the abandonment of any child under 15 years in the street. If FTDA cannot accommodate the child the Brigade des Mineurs de la Police should be notified and they should find somewhere for them. If they can't, normally the child would have to remain in the offices of the Brigade until the following morning when a place should be found. There is a duty to inform the authorities if a child is found alone, however, although this does happen, not all are immediately taken into care, and some prefer to stay with their friends and compatriots until they orientate themselves. In other cases, there are simply not the resources to care for all those who arrive.

The situation is further complicated since the children's section of the FTDA, and the Social Services more generally, have adopted a wait and see attitude. They do not rush to place children since, according to one FTDA worker, many of them will decide to move on and try their luck in other countries. This is a source of tension with other support groups, who argue that if children were placed quickly, they would not want to move on. This is disputed by FTDA. Some of the young people to whom I spoke, even though they were in the care of social services, were planning on moving on. As with the adult exiles, these decisions were often based on rumours circulating among the exiles about possibilities for work (and of luxuries provided in other countries), rumours that were

often – though not always - completely erroneous. Examples include those that, unlike in France, they would have their own rooms with kitchen and bathroom, a computer, swimming lessons and parties in Sweden, or if they made it to England they would be able to earn more than €50 a day. It is not only adults who are under pressure from families at home^{vi}. Minors also want to start earning and sending money back as quickly as possible.

A striking feature of the conversations with the teenagers was the relative value given to information from mates over information from adults. This may be true for teenagers throughout Europe, but in France this distrust is fostered when young people are informed that as minors the French state has a duty to protect them, but they then find themselves sleeping in a park for prolonged periods of time. In terms of making decisions about their immediate future, they preferred to trust their friends (no matter that they may have only recently met), rather than foreign adults, whose information may or may not be accurate.

Food

For food, the exiles rely on ‘humanitarian aide’ (soup kitchens) provided by a number of charities. The food is always the same (e.g. a bowl of stew from ‘Une chorba pour tous’; a tin of fish, a bread roll, a portion of processed cheese, a yoghurt and a bottle of water from the Salvation Army – the former is dinner, the latter served for breakfast/lunch). Although the food is minimal, thought is given to the nutritional needs of those who receive it. Only rarely does the food run out before everyone has had something. The distribution is followed by a frenzy of swopping as people exchange what they don’t like with others – and these exchanges occur between Parisians and exiles.

At the distribution points, the exiles wait alongside the poor Parisians, most of whom seem to be of north African extraction^{vii}. To avoid conflict, those waiting for food are organized into two queues, the exiles and everyone else. The exiles I spoke to compared these handouts very favourably to those provided in, for example, Greece or Iran. Nonetheless, morale was definitely affected by the strange food, and by concerns about whether food was halal or haram, although again the exiles appreciated very much efforts to ensure that food was halal, unlike Greece where if food was provided, the exiles were expected to eat and be grateful, whether or not it conformed to their needs.

Accommodation

An organization that is particularly important for the exiles in guiding them through the asylum labyrinth is France Terre d’Asile (FTDA). FTDA monitors asylum, its evolution and implementation in France. It advises asylum seekers on their rights and guides them through the process. FTDA provides an important orientation point for the exiles, but not all find their way there. Aside from advice, FTDA is also responsible for managing 29 reception centres for asylum seekers (CADA, Transit, CPH), although the 2,000 places it provides are always oversubscribed, and are only available to those who have made an asylum claim. As a result, many of the exiles are forced into emergency shelters for the long term homeless.

Each evening a bus arrives in a Square close to the park. Only those whose names are on the list will be taken to the emergency shelter. Early in the morning, a queue forms in the

park and names are taken. This is to try and ensure that those forced to sleep outside one night stand a chance of a bed the following night. However, some prefer not to use the emergency accommodation, either because of the very strict regime or because they don't wish to share with alcoholics and drug takers, or because they don't wish to participate in the sometimes violent scramble for places on the bus.

The number of homeless in Paris alone is estimated at between 10,000 and 12,000 (BAPSA 2008). Because the places in the shelters are heavily oversubscribed^{viii}, and because in July/August 2008 there was a relatively high number of Afghans looking for accommodation, the representatives from the shelters introduced a quota system for the different groups (locals, Afghans, others) and appointed a representative from each group to assign places, and to try and circulate the places, so that it was not always the same people who got shelter. Unfortunately, this occasionally led to tensions among those waiting in the street as some felt that the 'managers' were abusing their authority and assigning places to those who were friends or had paid. Whether such favouritism exists or not, the resentment is real and would occasionally erupt into violence. On other occasions, over-tired, panicky young boys, refused a place, would lose control and sob publicly.

Those who do not get a place go to the park, or sleep under the canopy of a block of flats close to the park. If the latter, they are woken by residents irritated or frightened by their presence. In some cases, the young men sleeping there have been physically abused by residents angered by the noise or mess. If the former, they wait until the park is locked for the night and then climb over the railings, and seek out bushes that offer some protection and privacy. Most do not have mats or blankets, and wrap themselves in whatever clothing they have. When it rains, they stand in the bandstand, or under a tree, or in a phone box. On some nights, they would be woken in the middle of the night and cleared out of the park by the police – sometimes this could happen two or three times on the same night. If they try to shelter in the nearby Gare de l'Est they are moved on by security.

Sometimes the Brigade d'Assistance aux Personnes Sans Abri, a section of the Paris Police Prefecture come past in a van, and encourage people to take a lift to the emergency shelter at Nanterre, outside Paris. Occasionally, these invitations would follow the clearing out of the park by their colleagues. The exiles are very reluctant to take up the invitation (which can be refused) because Nanterre hosts long-term homeless people with attendant alcohol, drug and psychiatric problems.

Health

Close to the park is the Hôpital de St Louis. Those who are sick can go to the hospital and try to see a doctor. The system is complicated and difficult for any non-French speaker to understand, but it is open to all who need it, regardless of their immigration status. The patient has to register to see the doctor. The quality of the treatment does seem to depend on the doctor, his/her language skills and his/her willingness to make an effort. Fortunately for some, the hospital staff include an Afghan doctor who speaks the necessary languages, though the situation is difficult when he is absent for any length of time. The hospital is 10 minutes walk from the park, and is frequented by the exiles, not

least because proof of illness, in the shape of a letter from the doctor, may move them up the waiting list for accommodation. The reasons for seeing a doctor range from the long term effects of beatings and injuries en route to or in Paris, chest infections, skin complaints (in some cases stress related and in others due to their living conditions).

Solidarity

In addition to the services provided to Paris's poor and homeless, the exiles also have support from specific organizations such as FTDA and GISTI (Groupe de Soutien aux Travailleurs Immigrés), who provide legal advice and information. However, these organizations are overstretched, and new arrivals are often unaware of their existence. In May 2003, when the phenomenon first became apparent, a group of disparate people came together to form the Collectif du soutien des exilés du 10^{ème} arrondissement du Paris. These are people who live in or around the 10th arrondissement. Some belong to different NGOs, others to political parties and still others are non-aligned, but residents concerned about the young men on their doorsteps.

The goal of the collective is to persuade the political powers to face up to their responsibilities, to assist the exiles, especially the growing number of children among them, in obtaining a status that offers them protection, dignity and a way out of their precarious situation^{ix}. Its strategies include lobbying politicians, especially local politicians, and those working with the exiles, including FTDA and the social services, to improve their services to the exiles by providing accommodation and legal advice. One proposition, not yet realized, is the creation of kiosk that could receive and inform new arrivals about their rights. From January 2006, the collective took the decision to try and be present each evening at food distribution points and at the bus collection point in order to monitor the implementation of the 'plan to accommodate the homeless'. This surveillance also permits contact with the new arrivals, allowing the members of the collective to meet them and offer them some guidance and information.

Such monitoring is essential, not just because members of the collective are sometimes able to calm tensions arising from misunderstandings between different groups (SDF, exiles, residents, employees of other organizations) thanks to having built up trusting relationships with the exiles (especially in the case of those members of the collective who have learnt some Dari), but also because without such witnesses, some of the abuses experienced by the exiles would go unnoticed – in some cases, they continue to go unpunished^x.

The most visible member of the collective is M, who six evenings a week wanders down to where the exiles gather for food. On around two evenings a week, he is joined by other members, in particular J and S. Maps and information sheets are offered. The maps are of Paris, showing the location of services that the exiles can use and of Europe showing where the countries are in relation to each other. The information sheets explain the French system, what they can expect as they progress through it. They also detail the current legal situation, policy and practice in a number of countries about which the exiles regularly ask in Dari and Pashto.

Each evening the same questions are repeated, often by the same people. The first questions are often about where people can sleep. For minors, the answer is that they should approach FTDA the following day. For families, they should phone the emergency number 115^{xi}, which can usually arrange one or two nights in a hostel or cheap hotel (e.g. Formule 1), until the family have been seen by the Coordination de l'Accueil des Familles Demandeuses d'Asile (CAFDA) the following day. However, the hotels are often outside Paris and if the family has no money to get there (and return), they will spend the first night, and quite possibly subsequent nights in the park. Even if the new arrivals are minors, because of a shortage of places or because they don't want to be separated from friends, they too may well end up in the park. Usually the members of the collective will alert the social services when someone in priority need is spotted, and when accommodation can be found, maps and directions will be provided. For adult men arriving, the volunteers can offer very little advice unless they can get a bed in one of the emergency hostels described above. Having said that, for this group accommodation is not necessarily their priority.

The next question is usually 'where can I go?', 'where should I go?', 'what are my chances if I stay?', 'could I go to England?', 'is it true that I won't be sent back from France to Afghanistan?', 'will they give me a passport?' The members of the collective are clear that it is not their role to make suggestions or tell people where to go. Instead, they will offer facts – e.g. that Norway has suspended deportations to Greece (as they did in February 2008); that country x is more likely to recognize someone from Afghanistan as a refugee than country y or z; that if trying to transit country w and caught by the police they may be returned to France, or directly to Greece, or detained, that Norway has reversed its decision with regard to adults (as they did in July 2008), or that Switzerland would join Eurodac and ratify the Dublin Convention from November 2008.

Other questions reveal the problems translating certain terms and the dangers of word of mouth, the primary source of information for the exiles. Some tell stories of friends who received Italian passports that allow them to travel anywhere in Europe. Discussion revealed that the person in question had received a form of subsidiary protection, which allowed them to travel within the Schengen area but making the distinction is a challenge since such statuses are outside the experience of the exiles. Others try to confirm rumours about new laws, policies and practices around the EU, or to ascertain the recognition rates in different countries, so as to work out where their application stands the best chance of being accepted.

The repetition of the questions is a reflection of the difficulty of explaining a very complex system, using limited language skills, to people unused to highly developed state structures. The exiles ask the same questions because they are unsure that they have understood the response correctly, and because some of the concepts are unfamiliar. But for many, the repeated questions represent the search for a key that might unlock the prison in which they find themselves, the possibility that some kernel of information will offer a way out. Even though the information offered by the members of the collective rarely offers any hope, and frequently dashes it, in general the exiles do not 'shoot the messenger' – while it is difficult to explain that the collective had no real official status,

and can offer nothing other than information, for the most part the exiles are clear that the collective is working in their interest.

Some of the young men use the internet, mostly news sites, but some do not understand, for example, how it is possible to buy something online using a credit card. If no one in their family has a credit card, receiving money from family or friends is a real problem, since without identity papers, they cannot collect money from Western Union, for example. As a result, one of the questions asked of members of the collective is whether they would be prepared to have money sent to them, so that they could pass it to the exiles. Such an act of solidarity by a member of a similar group in Calais resulted in a criminal conviction, so once again the assistance the members of the collective can offer is curtailed.

The consequences of waiting on the young men and their families

The resilience of this group of young men is impressive. Although they arrive exhausted and often bewildered, they seem to orientate themselves relatively quickly as those who have been around longer fill them in on what – and who – they need to know. First impressions are of cheerful, fit, polite, strong young men. Although this impression is largely well-founded, closer acquaintance inevitably reveals a battle against despair and frustration as their ability to plan a future and act on that plan is thwarted by the factors discussed above. This is compounded by pressure from home. Most of the exiles I spoke to are in weekly contact by phone with their families back home. They often spoke of the responsibility they carry. As N told me, he feels bad when he calls, because his mother asks him ‘what are you doing in Europe? You know that we are waiting, we are starving’. He spends his days walking the streets asking for work, hoping that he can earn money to allow him to continue his journey and to send money home. Another young man, the eldest of six children, whose family is continually moving between Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan to where they are deported tells of phone calls in which his family ask when he going to send for them, whether he has any intention of helping them.

Y spoke of the psychological damage that he and his friends were suffering: ‘we are going crazy. Human beings are not made to just sit and wait. We want to work, to study, to do something, to move – not to sit all day and do nothing. We are not old men.’ He was not alone. Others noted that if they were forced to wait in this limbo much longer, they would end up like the damaged people they saw on Paris streets, taking refuge in alcohol, drugs or madness. Many find it impossible to understand why they are not allowed to be self-sufficient, why they are forced to waste their time, and the time of the authorities. They find it incomprehensible that if rejected by one MS, they are not allowed even to travel to another to ask for asylum there. Aware that they have a great deal to offer, and feeling cheated by a Europe that in their home countries preaches human dignity and human rights, confusion and puzzlement become anger and resentment, and there is every chance that such resentment will not disappear easily but will shape the attitude of those who are able to stay. It will be difficult for these young men to identify with a society that has kept them waiting without allowing them to use their time productively.

On 'host' and origin societies

In Paris, the exiles are competitors with other disadvantaged groups for scarce resources such as accommodation. The scramble for places each night regularly leads to arguments and occasionally fights with other homeless people, mostly of Maghreb origin (see note vi). This has led to bitterness and tension between the 'Arabs' and the 'Afghans' as they refer to themselves. There are also tensions between local residents who, angered by the number of men hanging around and the untidiness that accompanies them, become abusive, referring to the exiles as scum and threatening them with the police and or violence.

However, there are more serious and longer consequences of this indefinite waiting period both for the communities they leave and those in which they wait. Unable to establish themselves, this group of exiles can contribute neither to their home communities nor to Parisian or any other European society. It is difficult to imagine what will become of these young men and the families that are waiting and depending on them in Afghanistan. When I first read Bauman's characterization of asylum seekers in *Wasted Lives* (2004) I was uncomfortable with it. And yet, what strikes one most strongly about the exiles of the 10th arrondissement is the waste of their lives. The loss to that country of a generation of bright, strong young men must constitute a long-term wound. Were they to be allowed to establish themselves abroad, there would at least be the possibility of remittances or that they might return one day bringing experience and skills to invest in their home countries.

Snakes and ladders

All of the young men referred to here are waiting *for* something, at the most basic, to be able to construct a 'normal' life, to be able to work and to support their families, without threats to their lives. Their waiting has a purpose, a goal, in other words they have the expectation and the hope that they will find a way out of the *cul de sac* in which they find themselves. It is this that sustains them. Cruelly, the supporters who seek to offer them support in the form of information find themselves consistently offering information that undermines the hope that sustains them while they wait. Aside from a brief period when the exiles could be assured that if they made it through Germany and Denmark, they stood a good chance of being recognized as a refugee in Norway, all that we can tell them is – if you go anywhere, you will be picked up and returned to Greece, or Italy. It is as though they are playing a game of snakes and ladders in which the dice are loaded.

And the longer the exiles wait, the more people they encounter who, having climbed up the ladder and made to another EU MS, are then pushed down the Dublin II snake. Unsurprisingly, the strongest feelings – shared by some of their supporters – are those of frustration and impotence, feelings that tip easily into anger. The exiles are prevented at every turn from taking responsibility for themselves, and at the same time resented by host societies because of the responsibility that they are assumed to impose. They are forced to wait, but it is becoming less and less clear what awaits them.

Epilogue

N made it England and within 2 days found work in a hotel. Knowing he can be picked up and deported at any moment, nonetheless he at least has the chance to earn some money to send to his family.

J made it to Sweden and planned to try and travel on to Norway.

M is leaving for Denmark, promising to call if he makes it to Norway.

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ⁱ This expression seems to capture best the status of these young men – exiled from their countries of origin by violence and poverty, and exiled from European society by a pernicious network of laws, regulations and directives that condemn them to waiting for a chance to make a future for themselves. Undocumented migrants is insufficient, because some have some kind of document (including temporary admission to France for the purpose of pursuing an asylum claim). Asylum seeker is not accurate because the majority have not claimed asylum (for a variety of reasons). At the same time, in much of this paper reference is made to the asylum system, because, coming from Afghanistan, one might assume that granting asylum would be an appropriate response to their needs.

ⁱⁱ The conversations that inform this paper took place in either English or Greek (with the exiles) or French (with their supporters). The conversations with the exiles would not have been possible without the goodwill and patience of three in particular who acted as interpreters (and teachers of Dari): Ahmad, Jawad and Zak.

ⁱⁱⁱ In this paper, the focus is on those minors sleeping in the park. For more information on the rights and situation of unaccompanied minors in France see http://www.france-terre-asile.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=611&Itemid=9#positions

^{iv} Though perhaps unsurprising, since the population of Afghanistan is very young and minors account for between 43% and 46% of Afghans in the camps in Pakistan and Iran, who host the largest population of Afghan refugees (source: e-migrinter 2008)

^v Note: these figures refer ONLY to Afghan minors sleeping in one park in Paris. There are other minors sleeping elsewhere, from different countries of origin.

^{vi} The pressure may not be direct – often it is the young people themselves who internalized a strong sense of responsibility for those left behind.

^{vii} It is not possible to test this empirically since the French state will not collect data on ethnic minorities – a category that does not exist in France. This is in spite of repeated criticism from the UN, which in its recent

report requested that the French state ‘should reexamine its position concerning the official recognition of ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities’ (ONU 2008).

^{viii} Following an open letter from the mayor of Paris, Bernard Delanöe, to the housing minister Christine Boutin (24/07/2008), in which he asked that a further 100 places be made available to the exiles, representatives from various newspapers and radio and television stations descended of the places where the exiles wait for food and the chance of a bed.

^{ix} See www.exiles10.org for further details.

^x On one such occasion, two of us from the collective witnessed employees of the bus company empty a large can of tear gas into the face of one of the exiles, before beating and kicking another on the ground. Our intervention ended the attack quickly, but attempts to ensure the attackers were disciplined or charged have proved fruitless.

^{xi} Although the service is provided in a number languages, it can take some time to find an interpreter, and in addition there are very long waits for the phone to be answered, and while searches for accommodation are carried out. On one evening, I spent 3 hours in a phone box trying to assist one family.