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Who Cares About Data? Ambivalence, Translation, and Attentiveness in Asylum Casework

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Abstract. Scholars across Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) increasingly focus on the topic of care when investigating data-driven technologies in contexts of re-humanizing technology design and usage. Previous studies have shown how care work eludes complex bureaucratic systems shaped by data, digitalization, and a restrictive political agenda. This research aims to understand how asylum stakeholders enact care as an aspect of asylum casework, while navigating what is largely acknowledged by NGOs, nation states, and the EU to be a broken asylum system (von der Leyen). We investigate care as a relational aspect of casework in which knowledge and technology of the implicated caseworker and asylum seeker are attuned to one another in a way that takes the unaccountable into account (following Mol 2010). We add to studies of care in CSCW by empirically expanding the research sites of care and data work. In this multi-sited ethnographically informed study, we conducted interviews (n = 19) and 160 h of observational studies amongst: 1) Danish Red Cross care workers; 2) Danish Refugee Council legal counsellors; and 3) Danish Immigration Service case officers. We contribute empirically grounded insights into the meanings of care in a datafied asylum context. We find that care is enacted by caseworkers in moments of ambivalence, translation, and attentiveness to “new substantial information” relevant for asylum decision-making. We find that these relational aspects of care in asylum casework impact the production of data about the asylum seeker. We end with a discussion of how a care perspective increases our sensitivity as CSCW researchers towards understanding the conditions for producing quality data and documentation in casework.

Keywords: Asylum, Care, Casework, Datafication, Data Work, Decision-making, Documentation, Ethnography, NGOs, Refugees, Caseworker Systems

1 Introduction

Data and digitalization increasingly shape work and how people cooperate. Scholars propose designing technologies centered around human needs to address social context and ethical issues in data production, analysis, and use
Kaziunas et al. (2017) suggest that care can be a design material, impacting the development of information systems in fields like health services. They propose caring-through-data as a concept that they use as a lens to analyze types of care and thus turn researchers’ and designers’ attention towards the relational complexities and consequences of living with (health) data. They argue for bringing to the fore empirical data narratives that showcase the “multiplicity of emotional concerns and social arrangements” of care work (Ibid, p. 1).

For asylum casework, data are also a critical aspect of people’s lives to establish their identity and asylum motive. An asylum case is assembled of various data points collectively produced by multiple caseworkers. To claim asylum, a displaced individual is constructed through data into an asylum seeker (Rask Nielsen and Holten Møller, 2022). The distributed and cooperative activities across authorities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) show the complexity of the asylum domain. In Denmark, the context that we investigate, Danish Immigration Service (DIS) case officers, Red Cross (RC) care workers, and Danish Refugee Council (DRC) legal counselors work side-by-side in Danish asylum centers as front-line workers struggling to do their jobs just reasonably satisfactorily within the framework of the restrictive system. In the broader field of asylum studies, scholars point out how the symbiosis of NGOs and authorities in the asylum domain resembles an industry (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sørensen, 2013; Hamilton Byrne et al., 2023); thus care cannot be taken as a given in what drives this type of casework.

A CSCW viewpoint investigates how cooperative activities can be maintained and further supported. We study this work domain from the perspective of RC care workers, DRC legal counselors, and DIS case officers, who are accountable to both the displaced individuals applying for asylum and the political system. In an asylum decision-making context, where data act to reinforce vulnerable people’s marginality and where data are used to target these vulnerable people for suspicion and scrutiny, this calls for a sensitive approach to the role of data and digitalization. When technological advances increase, nation-states’ and NGO’s ability to uphold people’s well-being and human rights are even further tested. When developing data-driven approaches to casework, it is therefore critical to investigate and question the situated (Kantowitz and Suchman, 1990) data practices already embedded—to the context in which data are produced—since “data are not given; they are made” (Cheney-Lippold, 2017, 54) and never simply “raw” (Gitelman, 2013).

We contribute to and extend CSCW work that takes care as a perspective to increase sensitivity towards the relational complexities and consequences of work practices being shaped by data and digitalization in a highly politicized context. Following Mol et al., (2010), we investigate care as a relational aspect of
casework in which “bodies, knowledge and technology are attuned to one another
in a way that takes the unaccountable into account, that is attentive to the indeter-
minate” (p. 82).

Care in a CSCW context has been researched in relation to healthcare
(Kaziunas et al., 2017, 2019; Ismail et al., 2018; Seo et al., 2019), homelessness
(Le Dantec et al., 2011; Le Dantec, 2016), family caregiving (Schorch et al., 2016), social welfare (Sciannamblo et al., 2021), education and learning
environments (Karusala et al., 2017; Lu et al., 2021), and asylum and refugee
studies (Talhouk et al., 2016; Tachtler et al., 2020; Krüger et al., 2021a, b).
Instead of focusing on ‘care work’ as yet another type of work (care is not
our object of study), we investigate care as a relational aspect of casework.
By relational we mean the construed nature of data and data use and re-use
across contexts. Building on prior CSCW research, we contribute by empiri-
cally exploring how authorities and NGOs support individuals in navigating
an asylum system that is becoming increasingly data-driven.

Examining care as a relational aspect of asylum casework is crucial, we
argue, when the asylum system is becoming more data-driven (Rask Nielsen and
Holten Møller, 2022), politicized (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Tan, 2017), based
on increasingly restrictive policies (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2017) and grounded “in a
climate of closed-door immigration policies” (Ticktin, 2011, 2). We argue for a
focus on care because the political structural conditions that are shaping case-
work today are also shaping the development of new data-driven technology to
support asylum casework; thus, we seek to describe and expand a theory of care
as a design material.

RC care workers, DRC legal counsellors, and DIS case officers all produce,
curate, analyze, interpret, and communicate data about the asylum seekers—data
that enter and intersect various casework systems and are used to construct asy-
lum cases. Thus, in this paper, we refer to these three asylum actors collectively
as asylum caseworkers.

We base this paper on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2021 and
2022 across multiple settings. Our three field sites: 1) RC, at a so-called ‘return
center’ in Denmark; 2) the DRC; and 3) the DIS; allowed us to examine the
question that guides our research:

How are asylum caseworkers enacting care as a relational aspect of casework when pro-
ducing data about asylum applicants for decision-making?

1 https://www.nyidanmark.dk/en-GB/Waiting/Asylum/Housing%20of%20asylum%20applicants/Asy-
lum%20centre
We investigate this question as part of a larger interdisciplinary research project: Data Science for Asylum Legal Landscaping (DATA4ALL).²

When we first started conducting this research, we did not intend to study care, nor to make it part of our analysis. However, the importance of care in an asylum casework context started emerging early on, while conducting interviews and observations aimed at obtaining background information about the Danish asylum system. While learning about “the brutal measures [that] accompany actions in the name of care and rescue” (Ticktin, 2011, 5), we experienced how traces of care appeared as important aspects of our empirical data, which comprised the narrations of the RC care workers, the DRC legal counsellors and return counsellors, and the DIS case officers. These narrations came up in interviews and more informal talks, for example, and contained both affective and ambivalent dimensions of asylum casework.

Our ethnographic study suggests that care impacts how data about a person applying for asylum are produced and consequently how this person’s asylum case is constructed. Focusing on the process of constructing the case documentation, we show how paying attention to other sites of data production, for example ‘sites’ beyond the authorities’ interview process, shifts our understanding of data and case documentation. The relational aspects of casework, we find, are enacted in the situated process where caseworkers care that asylum seekers know how to navigate the system. In this sense the paper points to the specific ways in which asylum caseworkers enact care within the boundaries of the asylum system, both individually and collaboratively, in order to ensure that a case is sufficiently documented.

Even if the aim of this analysis is not to be representative or generalizable of the collective asylum caseworkers’ working practices, care is an aspect of casework more generally when caseworkers enable individuals to navigate a system (Holten Møller et al., 2019). Casework is a practice “where the interaction and relation between officials and the public [individuals] create space for contextual discretion in the application of policy, rather than systemic enforcement” (Ibid p. 243). The aspects of care that we present in this paper are not technically but rather socially determined; thus, we argue that affective labor and socially supportive work is not fully recognized, evaluated, or formally valued as an important property of asylum casework.

Theoretically, this research brings a notion of care to research on datafication and data work in casework (Bossen et al., 2019; Meng et al., 2019; Møller et al., 2020). Our contribution to CSCW does not lie in technological innovation. Rather, this paper contributes to bringing care to the fore within CSCW and the HCI community more broadly. Empirically, we contribute grounded insights on the role of care and argue for the importance of care in relation to

² https://asylumdata.ku.dk/research/data-science-for-asylum-legal-landscaping-data4all/
case documentation. Our study shows how care is enacted as a relational aspect of casework through i) ambivalence; ii) translation; and iii) attentiveness to “new substantial information”.

Data about the asylum seeker are produced in a setting of asymmetric power relations. People applying for asylum need caseworkers’ translation to set the framework and draw up a map of the asylum system’s many opaque and complex bureaucratic rules and procedures. The relational aspects of care in casework are essential, we argue, for countering the inadequacies or technological fixes of formal procedural data-driven caseworker systems and processes (Eubanks, 2017; Benjamin, 2019). Caseworkers are positioned to support individuals that have been rejected asylum through caseworkers’ attentiveness toward “new and substantial information”. This can impact data quality in important ways, including shaping what data about the applicant are being produced and how they are shared across authorities and NGOs and used to construct asylum case documentation. Following Bowker (2005): “data should be cooked with care” (p. 184), as it is only when the individual asylum seeker and the caseworker can both navigate the process of data production and case construction that an asylum case is sufficiently documented. Why? Because a fundamental principle of administrative law is that authorities have the responsibility to document a case sufficiently before reaching a decision. In other words, relational aspects of care in casework are essential to ensure asylum seekers’ democratic and legal rights.

The structure of the paper is as follows: first, we situate our analytical approach in relation to the CSCW and HCI literature on datafication and data work in casework on the one hand, and care on the other hand. Second, we provide an overview of the study and context, followed by our methodology. Third, we present our findings, and lastly, we discuss why it is important to build on the CSCW agenda of strengthening care practices in increasingly data-driven casework, meaning the relational work that facilitates the production of data that makes an asylum case sufficiently documented.

2 Related work

2.1 Asylum casework as a ‘datafied’ practice

In CSCW and related fields of research, concerns about ‘datafication’ are part of a standing debate about its consequences on bureaucratic casework as governments encode hierarchies of citizens and non-citizens into the infrastructures of European societies (Amrute, 2016). Studying asylum casework as a ‘datafied’ practice and questioning its consequences is important and timely because researchers, governments, and NGOs are increasingly testing how data-driven technologies could be applied to asylum and migration, including domains such
as border enforcement, decision-making, and data mining (Metcalfe and Dencik, 2019; Molnar, 2019; Ustek-Spilda and Alastalo, 2020).

Datafication describes the increased reliance on data for decision-support across sites of data production, which makes it challenging for individuals to contest or correct data-born accounts of their situation (Holten Møller et al., 2019). A key argument in this debate is that data not only represent lived realities but also shape them—data shape structures (systemic, social, economic etc.), identities, and citizenship. Datafied practices are core to constructing a European people (Ruppert and Scheel, 2021). Data are used in asylum processes to encode people applying for asylum into categories that have profound consequences for the applicants’ futures (Rask Nielsen and Holten Møller, 2022).

Asylum casework as a domain is set to be fundamentally reformed by data-driven technologies. Such technologies are often mobilized based on the assumption that they are more objective and fairer than humans’ discretionary judgment (Brayne and Christin, 2021). Such procedural changes, for example in Canada, include experimenting with automated decision-making in immigration and asylum determination (Molnar and Gill, 2018; Molnar, 2019). In Canada, as well as in the United States, people applying for asylum can be assisted by a chatbot to complete their applications (Ng et al., 2022). In Germany, pilot projects using language biometrics software support case officers to establish the identity of asylum applicants (Tangermann, 2017; Beduschi, 2021). Scholars also use data science techniques to better understand the complex, cooperative work practices in asylum decision-making (Kaltenhäuser et al., 2022) as well as to predict previous asylum decisions made by judges (Chen and Eagel, 2017), with the purpose of minimizing variation in decision outcomes (Ramji-Nogales et al., 2009).

Most research in CSCW and the broader field of HCI approach data production as data gathering and collection; however, how data are produced – and especially the power relations through which data are produced and how they influence data production in the first place – tends to be overlooked (Ellingson and Sotirin, 2020a). In this regard, little is known about how the role of care shapes data production, and so we turn our attention to how data are shaped as a basis for such emerging areas for technology development.

2.2 Power relations in casework and the production of quality data

Power relations influence how stakeholders are involved in collecting, cleaning, or modelling data (Stephensen and Treré, 2020; Holten Møller et al., 2021) as a situated practice (Kantowitz and Suchman, 1990). The term ‘data cascades’ describes the technical “debt” in machine learning model deployment that results from data produced by disregarding local conditions or aspects of data work. Sambasivan et al., (2021) remind us of the need “to move from current approaches that are reactive and view data as grunt work, to a proactive focus on “data excellence”, meaning “focusing on the practices,
politics, and values of humans of the data pipeline to improve the quality and sanctity of data” (p. 10). Thus, this “debt” is important to unpack in a context where datafication and restrictive political agendas increasingly shape asylum decision-making into a distributed practice.

Chancellor et al., (2019) call for investigating “CSCW’s relationship with and responsibility to issues around data, power, and justice”. Dencik et al., (2018) suggest using data justice as a lens to “understand the relationship between data and social justice […] [and] how data contributes to structural conditions that continue or create new injustices”. D’Ignazio and Klein, (2020) propose that, if we are concerned with justice in data science, we should “practice recognizing, naming, and talking about these structural forces of oppression” (p. 167). This also includes understanding social power relations with regard to the data setting.

It can be difficult to analyze how power relations shape data production in practice. In the case of Danish asylum decision-making, the main setting for data construction is interviews that can last up to 7 to 8 h. However, these interview data are co-constructed with, for example, data from NGOs, data and records from other countries, policy-informed background data, and/ or data from the applicant’s mobile technologies and social media (Andreassen, 2020; Rask Nielsen and Holten Møller, 2022). As CSCW researchers, we need to broaden our understanding of the sites for data production as distributed; thus, to take into account the role of NGOs in supporting asylum seekers and how such relational aspects shape data and case documentation.

The interview data of asylum casework are produced in a relational setup, wherein they derive their quality and meaning from other types of data as well (e.g., social media). From a modelling perspective, quality data is defined as “proactively considering care, sanctity, and diligence in data as valuable contributions in the AI ecosystem” (Sambasivan et al., 2021, 2). Sambasivan et al. argue that any “solution needs to take into account social, technical, and structural aspects” (Ibid, p. 2). Winthereik and Vikkelsø, (2005) describe quality data by their ability to travel across organizational settings while enacting organizational accountability and trustworthiness.

Large-scale data are often presented to help us create better tools, public goods, and to solve complex problems; nation-states, international institutions, and NGOs increasingly seek to produce, interpret, and share data about people applying for asylum (Rask Nielsen and Holten Møller, 2022). Data that are stored and shared across various casework systems are assigned categorical meaning, often without the applicant’s direct involvement, consent, or comprehension of this datafication (Ustek-Spilda and Alastalo, 2020). Displaced individuals (or the so-called data subjects) cannot opt out of this datafied process when seeking asylum. As noted by Cheney-Lippold, (2017), data about us have many times come to replace who we actually are.
In asylum and migration, legal authorities rely on the criterion “credibility” as a measure for determining whether an individual should be granted asylum or not (Rask Nielsen and Holten Møller, 2022). Here, asylum decision-makers increasingly rely on data produced through established protocols and procedures. Data about the asylum applicant are often treated with more credibility than the oral testimony of the asylum applicants themselves (Ibid). With the rising development of data-driven bureaucratic decision-making processes—where individuals and legal authorities have differential power, the challenges of applicants’ agency and accountability grow (Ibid).

The corpus of work on which this paper is grounded “pay particular attention to undervaluing of data in high-stakes domains that have safety impacts on living beings” (Sambasivan et al., 2021, p. 1). Research that acknowledges the various forms of processing that necessarily occur before data production are especially relevant to our paper. Context affects and shapes which data are produced, and which are not. In other words, data are political in the sense that they are produced on assumptions, judgments, and values that dictate how and which questions are asked, and thus which data are produced (Pine and Liboiron, 2015). In casework, the construction of the individual’s data depends partly on the case-workers’ discretion and what they find to be relevant (Boulus-Rødje, 2018).

Similarly, technologies that are not developed for an NGO context (such as casework systems used by the DIS – see Figure 2), will shape the data production and influence existing practices. Voida et al., (2011) find that in the context of care provision, data and digital technologies add complexity. Passi and Jackson write, “it takes work to make data work” (2017, 2438). Data work is performed by all kinds of professionals who carry out the mundane socio-technical practices involved in the production, contextualization, interpretation, and leveraging of data (Bossen et al., 2019; Møller et al., 2020). Technological advances increase daily, including in high-stakes domains such as asylum and migration, where nation-states’ abilities to uphold people’s well-being and human rights are tested. If data science methods are to be applied to advance asylum law, it is critical to investigate and question the situated data practices embedded in casework (Boulus-Rødje, 2018; Holten Møller et al., 2019; Ammitzbøll Flügge et al., 2021) and explore “how the digital plays a role in organizational practice” (Dourish, 2017, 45). In this study, we therefore set out to empirically investigate the role of care in relation to the production of quality data.

2.3 Expanding sites of care in CSCW

Care is of growing interest within CSCW and the broader field of HCI (Schorch et al., 2016; Karusala et al., 2017; Kaziunas et al., 2017; Ismail et al., 2018; Kaziunas et al., 2019; Seo et al., 2019; Karusala et al., 2021; Sciannamblo et al., 2021). Several scholars have theorized on the notion of care in various ways and questioned normative stances that care is inherently good. For
example, in the context of healthcare, Vlachokyriakos et al.’s (2021, 778) findings illustrate “the ambivalent dimension of care—as both something that nurtures care, but also as something that has a distressful dimension (e.g., burn out)”. Similarly, Sciannamblo et al. show care as a type of cooperative maintenance work with affective implications (2021, 4).

This strand of research illustrates the complexity of care as an object of study, but also challenges normative stances on care that tend to disregard that “to care can feel good; it can also feel awful. It can do good; it can oppress” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, 1) – “its double meaning is clearly on display” (The Care Collective et al., 2020, 27).

In the context of child welfare, Roberts, (2007) describes “caseworkers’ dual roles as both investigator and supporter” (p. 886). Caseworkers are here characterized as both potential sources of useful information and material aid for families and, due to the system’s restrictive policies, as a monitoring body. Saxena et al., (2021, 2022) also show how families are cared for and supported by caseworkers having to navigate the framework of the system’s structural constraints and power asymmetries.

Distress and other negative affective dimensions of care are particularly relevant to work contexts within systems based on restrictive bureaucratic procedures and especially in work settings where caseworkers experience care as “persistent tinkering in a world full of complex ambivalence and shifting tensions” (Mol et al., 2010, 14). Deleuze and Guattari, (1987) categorize affect as a relational force that either strengthens or weakens the human capacity to act. In this context, Teli et al., (2018) show how collecting narratives can enable an understanding of situations deeply influenced by affects, especially situations “dealing with the relation between democracy and digital technologies” (p. 129). Poderi, (2020) describes how identifying traces of affect allows

“us to foreground how situated and embodied knowledge, emotions, expectations, needs, or desires are triggered through the ‘contact’ with other bodies, how these drive us to act (or not) in specific ways, and in turn how these actions (or lack thereof) trigger other human and non-human bodies” (p. 33).

Aligned with this thinking, Puig de la Bellacasa, (2017) writes that there “are situations when care work involves a removal of the affective” (p. 5) and argues that “good care” – or as-well-as-possible care – is never neutral because the work of care can be done within and for worlds that we might find objectionable” (p. 6). In this regard, Puig de la Bellacasa, (2017) remind us to pay “attention to the invisible but indispensable labors and experiences” of care (p. 162). Since care might entail oppression, there is a need to pay “attention to the ambivalent rhetoric and practices taken up in its name” (Martin et al., 2015, 630).
Sevenhuijsen, (2003) points out that care will never be free from power and conflict, and thus tightly intertwines with mutual trust and intention. Choosing to care “is not an individual action but intrinsically relational” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, 69). Through continuing interactions that support and sustain individual and/or collective well-being, care is enacted (Karusala et al., 2017).

In this paper, we focus on how “caring can be identified, researched, and understood concretely and empirically” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, 1) with the aim of bringing to the fore relational care practices in data production. Based on this study, we argue, that data documenting an asylum case “should be cooked with care” (Bowker, 2005, 184) as a way to care for those who care about others (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). CSCW researchers (e.g., Balka and Wagner, 2021) remind us to study and make visible the complex influences that shape the work of those who are ‘othered’ in diverse settings and across multiple contexts. We study asylum caseworkers’ informal care work practices. Why? Because a care perspective increases our sensitivity as CSCW researchers towards understanding the conditions for producing quality data and documentation in casework. Making this kind of invisible affective care work visible is crucial to understand “who is doing the work of data” (D’Ignazio and Klein, 2020, 26; Møller et al., 2020). It is critical to acknowledge and understand the relational aspects of care and data work to safeguard that this type of work is taken into consideration when developing new technologies.

We study how care is enacted as a relational aspect of asylum casework. In doing so, we focus on care as both a set of practices and narratives “that engages a wider range of human experiences between people, data, and technologies” (Kaziunas et al., 2017, 2269). We aim to “avoid reductionist simplifications of the good and evils of care” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) as we unpack “what is actually done in different situations under the blanket category of care” (p. 10) in a bureaucratic asylum context.

Bureaucratic principles, we argue, can never be an argument for a system that does not care for the individual. More so, in asylum, which is a bureaucratic context where the individuals applying for protection are subjected to data-driven classification, privacy issues, and other surveillance in ways that do not even remotely compare to what the general population is subjected to.

3 Overview of study and context

The context for this study is Danish asylum policy. Denmark signed the 1951 Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 2021a), of which a core principle is non-refoulement, which asserts that refugees must be protected from being sent back to a country where they risk persecution. Another principle is that people requesting asylum have the right to have their application processed through a fair and efficient asylum system, while having their fundamental human rights
respected. However, there is overall agreement that the European asylum system “no longer works” (The European Union, 2000). When legal principles are put into practice, the politics of the individual European member states shapes what it means that asylum decisions are, for example, “fair and efficient” as prescribed by the UNHCR, (2021a).

According to the Convention, legitimate asylum motives fall into one of three different categories: 1) **Convention protection**: the applicant is individually persecuted in their home country because of their religion, sexuality, political position, race, ethnicity, etc.; 2) **Individual protection status**: the applicant risks being subjected to torture, the death penalty, or other treatment in violation of European human rights if they return to their country of origin; 3) **Temporary protection status**: acts of war in the applicant’s home country hold a high probability of abuse against the civilian population (newtodenmark.dk, 2021a). Humanitarian residence permits are rare and only granted “if you suffer from a very serious treatment-requiring illness, or if you risk deterioration of a serious handicap by returning to your home country” (newtodenmark.dk, 2022a).

In recent decades, a series of restrictive deterrence policies around asylum and immigration has been imposed by the Danish government (Fischer et al., 2017; Gammeltoft-Hansen and Tan, 2017). While Denmark does not formally participate in the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) of the EU, the UNHCR considers Denmark to have a well-established asylum and reception system. However, the UNHCR has criticized a range of Denmark’s legislative changes, such as the passing of a new temporary protection status Article 7(3) in 2015, which constitutes a weaker protection than the previous Article 7(2). Article 7(3) targets people applying for asylum who lack an individual asylum motive but have fled because of the general situation in their country of origin (UNHCR, 2021b). People in this category will have their asylum cases reassessed if the situation in their home country improves.

### 3.1 The Danish Immigration Service and the asylum procedure

The Danish asylum system comprises three main phases: 1) registration and initial case processing, 2) processing of the case and accommodation, and 3) in case the application is rejected – departure position (Figure 1). As in other EU countries, the Danish asylum system is founded in law and thus based on a legal process. Furthermore, it is to a high degree also administrative and bureaucratic, with many different actors e.g., the police, immigration case officers, and NGOs. The asylum procedure is multifaceted, complex, and opaque (Berti et al., 2016). To provide the reader with an understanding of the asylum procedure, we

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sketched out a streamlined general view of the process (Figure 1). However, there are many exceptions and examples of asylum cases that do not fit into the simple, linear, and coherent depiction.

In the prototypical asylum case in Denmark, the DIS performs the initial data registration. Next, asylum seekers who can read and write are asked to fill in an asylum application form, which serves as baseline data for the subsequent case processing. The applicant is then invited to a first interview with the DIS, which decides in which country the case is to be processed.

According to the Dublin Regulation, if an asylum seeker is registered in another EU country, that member state is responsible for processing the case. If the asylum seeker’s first registration is found to be in Denmark, the application
can follow different procedures. The DIS can determine that the application should follow the *manifestly unfounded procedure* if they find that the individual has no valid ground for seeking asylum, such as if the individual applies asylum for economic reasons. The application can also be determined as an *expedited version of manifestly unfounded procedure* if the applicant comes from a country that both instances consider as safe, or *manifested well-founded procedure*, if the reason for asylum clearly falls into the recognized categories. In all the other cases, the application follows the so-called *normal procedure* to decide whether the applicant should be granted or rejected asylum.

If the person applying for asylum receives a rejection from the DIS in the normal procedure, the case is automatically appealed to the Refugee Appeals Board (RAB). The RAB examines the appeal and ultimately confirms the rejection or approves asylum. During this process, databases are key to storing and sharing information, since asylum decision-making is practiced within a widely distributed organizational network. Individuals applying for asylum in Denmark encounter a range of authorities that collect, produce, and share data about them in and across various databases—e.g., the databases in Figure 2, to which the first author was introduced as part of the fieldwork.

In the year of 2021, 2099 displaced individuals applied for asylum in Denmark, of which 1362 were granted asylum (Ministry of Immigration and Integration, 2022). The people not granted asylum are obliged to leave the country. The RAB allocates a departure deadline, which is either immediate, after 7 days, or 30 days. After this, the rejected asylum seeker no longer has legal residence in Denmark (The Return Agency [Hjemrejsestyrelsen], 2022a).

### 3.2 Return centers of the Danish asylum system

At the time of the study, there were 12 asylum centers in Denmark, including one reception center, three so-called return centers, and three centers for unaccompanied minors (newtodenmark.dk, 2022b). The centers are formally classified into three categories: 1) the reception center is for people applying for asylum who have just arrived in Denmark; 2) accommodation centers are for people who are having their asylum case processed; and 3) return centers are for people who have either had their asylum application rejected or are to be transferred or returned to another EU country according to the Dublin Regulation (newtodenmark.dk, 2022c).

The DIS has the overall responsibility for the asylum centers in Denmark, but has entered into agreements with municipalities, the RC, the Danish Emergency Management Agency, and the Danish Prison and Probation Service. The Danish Prison and Probation Service, which also runs Danish prisons, is responsible for the accommodation and operation of the return centers (newtodenmark.dk, 2018).
This multi-sited ethnographically informed study was carried out by following the work of: 1) an RC care team at a return center; 2) DRC legal counsellors at their main office in Copenhagen; and 3) by conducting interviews with DIS case officers in their offices at the asylum reception center.

The return center, in which a large part of this study was carried out, is (at the time of this study) for adults without children, and mainly for rejected asylum seekers in the so-called ‘departure position’ - “those who fall outside the ambit of care by nation-states” (Ticktin, 2011, 10). The center also houses applicants who

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4 At the time of this study, there were people living at the center who have children but who have either been forcibly removed or where custody of the child/children has been given to the other parent.
either fall under a manifestly unfounded urgent procedure or the Dublin procedure. The center has a capacity of 400 residents, although at the time of the study approximately 110 individuals were living there.

The center has 24-h staffing, video surveillance, and access control; however, it is still rather open. Residents are free to come and go during the day, while in principle they are subject to a residency requirement that compels them to stay and spend their nights at the center (The Danish Immigration Service and The Danish Agency for International Recruitment and Integration (SIRI), 2021). If residents want to spend the night outside the center, they must apply for permission by submitting a form no later than one week before the start of the desired stay outside the center. The application must be submitted to the operator of the center, the Danish Prison andProbation Service, which then forwards it to the Danish Return Agency, which makes the decision (The Danish Immigration Service and The Danish Agency for International Recruitment and Integration (SIRI), 2021).

The individuals living at the center are obliged to carry an identification card that is checked each time they pass the front gate (there are fences all around the center). An electronic system “the Adgangs- og Meldepligt system AMS” (formerly the SALTO-system) is installed to register whether the residents comply with their duty to report. In 2020, the DIS became aware of some unscheduled interruptions in the system, which caused a loss of personal data (newtodenmark.dk, 2021b) and potentially improper listing of some as absent from the center—a violation of the law. The duty to report residency is now manually handled 24 h a day by two people employed by the Danish Prison and Probation Service.

The residents are housed in the former military barracks, located in a still active military training area. Tanks cross the nearby main road and shooting practice is carried out on a regular basis (Ministry of Defence, 2022). The geographical placement of the center is rather isolated for people without a car, bike, or money for a bus ticket. This, combined with the registration that the residents are obliged to comply with, limits their freedom of movement.

3.2.1 The Red Cross department at the return center

RC has, in agreement with the Danish state, run asylum centers since 1984. The organization is responsible for the humanitarian and practical work at some of the centers (Red Cross, 2021). However, RC does not run the return centers. Instead, they are hired in by the Danish Prison and Probation Service to provide care, social work, health services, education, and activation, as well as volunteer efforts at the centers.

The RC care team have the responsibility to take care of residents living at the return center. It is the RC social coordinators’ job to ensure that people with special needs are identified, for whom the care team can then provide special guidance and support. Residents can be suggested in need for a “care spot” if, for
example, they are mentally or physically ill and thus in need for extra care and nursing. These so-called “care spots” are approved by the DIS. Regular meetings are held together with other professionals, such as employees from the RC clinic and the Prison and Probation Service. In these meetings, it is discussed which efforts can best ensure the wellbeing of the individuals with special care needs.

3.2.2 The Danish Refugee Council (DRC)
Another part of this multi-sited ethnographic field study took place at the DRC’s headquarters in Copenhagen. The DRC is a private humanitarian organization, founded in 1956, that works to help refugees and displaced individuals, protect their rights, and strengthen their prospects.

The DRC Asylum Department offers impartial counselling on all phases of the Danish asylum procedure, including counselling on the possibilities for rejected asylum seekers and prospects for voluntarily returning home (repatriation). In this phase of the asylum procedure, the DRC collaborates with the Danish Return Agency5 (The Return Agency [Hjemrejsestyrelsen], 2022b), which is the public authority that since 2020 has taken over the task from DRC of handling the counselling in relation to the return of rejected asylum seekers (Danish Refugee Council (DRC), 2022).

The DRC’s legal counselling takes place over the phone, via email, video, or at a meeting either in their office in Copenhagen or when they visit the asylum centers, prisons, detention centers, and municipalities. DRC’s return counselors are present twice a week at their offices at the return center where this study took place.

4 Methodology
4.1 Constructing our field site
We constructed our field site across multiple stakeholders. Firstly, we set out to qualitatively investigate the technology-supported collaborative data work practices and the workflows that support the asylum procedure. We wanted to explore how and which data about the displaced individuals applying for asylum are produced, stored, categorized, and shared across different actors, and used to inform asylum decisions.

The site is not simply out there, waiting to be discovered, but instead is constructed reflexively by every choice the CSCW researcher makes. In other words, selecting “the site” is a matter of interacting and participating with the material artefacts and the people engaged with them (Bjørn and Bouls-Rødje, 2015, p. 326).

5 https://www.eng.hjemst.dk
The distributed nature of data production in the asylum decision-making process is not easily reduced to an investigation of, e.g., a single actor, artefact, site, or process, we argue. Partnering with NGOs who have experience with and/or work to end oppression (e.g., based on class, race, gender, ability, sexual or gender orientation), is important for understanding their experiences of these matters (Dombrowski et al., 2016). To this end, the field sites in this study are: 1) RC at a return center, 2) the DRC Asylum Department, and 3) the DIS.

We recognize how power relations represent a critical issue in this study. Why? Because there is no neutral study of individuals in a highly politicized and conflictual context as asylum. In a study like this, there “is an obvious issue of representation and interpretation: whose voices are being heard? Are other, potentially relevant, voices being excluded?” (Wulf, 2018, 261). We understand that the choices we make throughout this ethnographically informed (Forsythe, 1999; Randall et al., 2007) and interpretivist study and while interacting with the “research site are integral to the method and its outcomes” (Le Dantec and Fox, 2015).

For contextualizing the study, we disclose aspects of the authors’ position- alities that inherently affect our work (Karusala et al., 2017). We are all white, Europeans, and identify as cis-gendered women. We have full-time employment at state-funded academic institutions. The first author carried out the main part of the field studies that informed this research paper. She worked in sensitive contexts prior to this study. The second author has worked in Denmark and comes from and works in southern Europe, a central “route” for many asylum seekers before they enter the Danish asylum system. The third author engaged with casework across several contexts, with a special focus on sensitive context, data, and power differences – and similar to the first author – works and comes from Denmark.

While conducting this research, we had weekly meetings where we reflected on our “inaction” (Homewood, 2019) and discussed our emotional struggles in conducting studies of asylum work processes. For example, how it can include feeling difficulties in making a difference for asylum seekers – and caseworkers. How it can feel like being an intruder when observing the meetings between them. Feelings of not being able to “fix” the injustices of asylum. How to deal with such feelings and how we communicate this part of our research process in a publication.

Our research is presented through the context; who and what perspective, we have chosen (and were able) to study, as well as through the lens of our own pre-understandings and assumptions, which of course contribute to the interpretive act between us as researchers and our constructed field site (Harding, 2004). We as “[r]esearchers bring data into being – construct, build, craft, formulate, compose, fashion, concoct, produce – in short, we make them” (Ellingson and Sotirin, 2020a) following (Ellingson and Sotirin, 2020b). It is “only the ethnographer’s
presence in the field and engagement with the site—through action and interaction—that produces the data that is then the basis of analysis” (Dourish, 2014, 3).

It is not simply what the ethnographer might see or hear, but also, for example, what the ethnographer might feel; that is, the ethnographer’s discomforts, disquiets, joys, and anticipations are as much ethnographic data as the statements of others to the extent that they reveal something of how a setting is organized (2014, 4).

4.2 Negotiating access

Negotiating access to interview asylum caseworkers and observe their work practices included considering how we could fairly represent the caseworkers’ perspectives. Much of the work of gaining access concerned explaining the aims of our research while negotiating with the DIS and the NGOs our presence in their work.

The backstage work of setting up a study is complicated. Access negotiation took various forms, such as reaching out to already trusted contacts, back-and-forth e-mails, phone calls, informal face-to-face conversations, interviews, etc. Ultimately, we negotiated access to conduct two long-term observations conducted by the first author, following the work of: 1) RC at a return center; and 2) the DRC. We conducted interviews at the DIS. It was important for us to establish a cooperation with all relevant stakeholders, including NGOs and authorities (Holten Møller et al., 2020).

Gaining access to study the two NGOs relied on several different people, some of whom became especially important for this multi-sited ethnographic field study (Bjørn and Boulus-Rødje, 2015; Van Duijn, 2020). Accessing both work settings was a matter of gaining the support of a key employee in one of the two organizations. This person saw the value of the research and was willing to vouch for the first author and became the sponsor of this study (Bryman, 2016). This key employee helped direct the first author to relevant people in other organizations, including the DRC, and to the more senior people who then, in the end, acted as gatekeepers for this study in the sense that they gave the final consent (Ibid) to let the first author ‘hang around’ for a longer period of time in both organizations.

The following snippets from interviews with legal counsellors from the DRC illustrate the difficulty of finding someone willing to give the final consent to “letting the first author in”:

DRC1: Yes, I will ask what they [DRC1’s boss and colleagues] say to that. It is just that we are so time constrained… But I think that it [the project] is wildly important...

DRC2: I will pass your inquiry on to my boss […]. It should be cleared with my boss because it is not up to me to decide [laughs].

DRC3: It is my boss you should talk to, yes.
DRC4: [the boss of DRC1, DRC2, and DRC3]: You may be allowed to observe conversations [with applicants] and then have a 10-minute talk with the legal counsellor before and afterwards. However, I just need to have this cleared with my boss.

Gaining access to study a non-public and complex asylum work setting in a Danish context is a challenge. Ultimately, the ethnographic field study unfolded over a period of 10 months, which we will describe below.

4.3 Data assembling and analysis

The work practices of the caseworkers were our research focus in this study and thus this study is solely on the caseworkers’ perspective. The first author observed the work practices of an RC care team and the DRC legal counselors, including their internal meetings as well as meetings with residents (at the return center) and individuals seeking counselling (at the DRC), conducted interviews, listened in on phone calls with other asylum actors (e.g., the DIS, the Return Agency, the DRC), and engaged in more informal conversations (e.g., while sharing an office, during lunch, and in transport to and from the return center) with the people working at the two field sites.

The first author became immersed in the work settings for a period, including the day-to-day informal conversations between caseworkers and with the rejected-/asylum seekers. The overall focus was on paying attention to both what the caseworkers that we studied said they were doing, as well as what the first author observed them doing (Randall et al., 2007; Dourish, 2014). Everyone in this study was made aware of the reason for the researcher’s presence (Bryman, 2016).

When we first started conducting this research, we did not intend to study care, nor to make it part of our analysis. However, the importance of care in an asylum casework context started emerging early on while conducting interviews and observations aimed at obtaining background information about the Danish asylum system.

Part of this study relied on observations of rejected-/asylum seekers’ meetings with DRC legal counsellors (20) and with the RC care workers (10), in addition to the general activities of DRC and RC employees (Table 1). Furthermore, the study was informed by qualitative data produced in interviews with DIS case officers. In total, we conducted 19 interviews (in situ and semi-structured) with: DIS case officers ($N=4$), DRC legal counsellors ($N=10$), RC care workers ($N=5$).

The in situ and semi-structured interviews lasted between 15 min and up to 2 ½ hours and were all conducted by the first author in the period from June 2021 to May 2022 (see activities in Table 2). To make the interviewees feel as comfortable as possible, the interviewees determined the time and place of
In the following, we report findings from our qualitative thematic analysis (Bryman, 2016) that formed the guiding set of principles as we analyzed the transcribed notes from non-recorded/recorded interviews, fieldnotes, photos, memos, reflections, etc. In addition, various documents such as news articles, press releases, legislation, etc., described to us the various actors of the Danish asylum system and their different professional roles as preparation before the actual interviews and observational studies were conducted. The inductively coded data were discussed, and codes and themes were refined across the research team into three themes characteristic of care in data work: i) ambivalence; ii) translation; and iii) attentiveness to “new substantial information”. In the following, we elaborate on how care is part of casework and the production of quality data between the caseworker and the individual applicant.

5 Findings: Care in Asylum Casework

5.1 Ambivalence about care for the individual

When investigating how care is enacted as an aspect of asylum casework, we must acknowledge the ambivalence in such care situations. From our multi-sited
ethnographic field study, we learn about moments of ambivalence between case-
workers and rejected/-asylum applicants, influenced by pressing bureaucratic
rules, and the law. Our study reveals how caseworkers strike a delicate balance
between bureaucratic constraints and seeking spaces to provide care. As a result,
our findings suggest that the production of data about rejected/-asylum seekers
occurs in moments of ambivalence, which can influence the types of data that are
produced and entered casework systems.

Most of the asylum applicants are in a vulnerable situation (e.g., risking being
sent back to persecution, violence, or poverty) and in critical need of support
(e.g., due to language barriers, cultural differences, and lack of knowledge of the
asylum process). However, not all the reasons to request help are legally con-
sidered a motive for granting asylum. Motives that fall out of the convention,
individual, or temporary protection status are not considered legally valid and
therefore these applications are rejected. We learn from our empirical data that
the relational context between caseworkers and the displaced individual’s vulner-
able situation and lack of legal knowledge, is characterized by ambivalence.

The following transcribed excerpt shows an instance of how the information,
provided by the asylum applicant is being considered by the DIS case officer as
irrelevant, as it does not fall into any of the three categories. Still, the DIS case
officer explains their ambivalent feeling of engaging with an applicant in clear
need for help, but lacking legal grounds for asylum:

DIS6: ‘There are also just rejections where we… I may well agree that the
correct decision is a rejection, but I still think it’s the unhappiest ever [to have
to make that choice] … It can for instance be an Indian man sitting the entire
day crying because he was born in the slums and raised in the slums, and he
will never come out of the slums. It… it can be insanely hard, but it is not a
valid reason to grant asylum [to this man]. And I do know that. I can agree
with that, of course, but it’s just still the world’s most unhappy soul you meet
who has no future prospects because he’s just pulled the shortest straw ever…
And that applies to him and a billion others, right. And poverty is just not at
reason for asylum. […] I feel sorry for him. But we do not use such a thing as
“feeling sorry for” in DIS…’

We learn from our empirical data that providing what would in some cases
feel like an ideal form of care towards the person who is in front of the asy-
lum caseworker many times fits uneasily into practicing the rules of the law. By
the caseworkers not being able to offer an ideal form of care we, in this case,
mean when their instinct to care contradicts their lack of agency to influence the
decision-making process. The above example illustrates how care, as an aspect
of casework, is enacted in moments of ambivalence and distress, that leads to a
removal of the affective in the decision-making process.
In our empirical data, we find further signs of how asylum caseworkers cope by exploring forms of caring that are allowed within the institutional boundaries. As an RC care worker explains: “We cannot help them [the residents at the return center]—but we can guide them” (RC1). The ambivalent feeling of working within a system with restrictive rules that determines what can—and cannot—be done while witnessing a humanitarian emergency resonates with empirical data from an interview with a DRC legal counsellor, who explained to the first author how asylum casework sometimes makes it difficult to stay fully true to the “NGO heart” (DRC3):

DRC3: ‘Well, sometimes I spend a little too much time on counselling because I sit with my NGO heart while listening to a person who tells me their story and who thinks their situation is unfair. And then I have a tendency to say: Well, that’s not right. It’s not the right decision [asylum decision granted by for example the DIS].’

We learn from this example that the boundaries to “how to care” in casework are distributed across caseworkers and contexts, meaning that care is shaped by situated practices. The distribution of care exacerbates the feeling of ambivalence since the caseworkers ability to provide humanitarian care often juxtaposes their lack of agency to influence the decision-making process.

The RC care team at the return center “try to help people to endure being in the situation they are in” (RC4). Every week, the RC care team updates a list in excel of all residents living at the return center. The list is printed out and serves as an important tool for the RC care workers. In this list, the individuals living at the center are marked with either a green, blue, or red color. Green is for the category “new residents”. Blue is for residents who have been assigned a so-called “care spot”, while red is for residents that the RC care team must pay extra attention to.

The core of RC’s care work is “to ensure a safe, meaningful and dignified waiting time with a focus on the future” (from an internal RC document: “Professional work description”). However, RC1 explains: “We work in an industry where there is no solution”. Most individuals who live at the center cannot be sent out of Denmark, which is why many live at the center for a longer period of time”. “Many are double-excluded – they have received a rejection both from Denmark and from their home country” (from an internal RC document: “Professional work description”).

At the return center, there are rules, tasks, and a framework that challenge RC’s ambitions of care. “We have very, very strict frameworks within which we must operate, which means that there are not so many options. […] The political discourse sets the framework for how we work” (RC1). The RC care team is hired by the Prison and Probation Service, not only to offer care to the rejected
applicants, but also to take on the “role as an authority”, meaning that [RC] “has a control function, is behind a desk, has to make decisions on behalf of the residents, or has otherwise increased power in the relationship with the resident” (from an internal RC document: “Professional work description”). In this regard RC1 explains:

RC1: ‘A lot can be written about a resident. There are some heavy requirements regarding what to report. For example, if you do not follow ‘The House Rules’. You may wonder why ‘The House Rules’ are specifically mentioned in the new Return Act. Is it really that important to mention a house rule? It is often the resident’s… how do you say this… the resident’s following or not following ‘The House Rules’ that creates a lot of attention around the resident. […] If you [a resident] have an unfortunate behavior, then you may actually have created so much attention that it can somehow affect your case, right.’

The RC care team ensures “documentation of observations, relevant contact, and correspondence between relevant actors in connection with the resident’s case in order to offer the resident the best possible care under the given framework” (Citation from an internal RC document: “The care work at [name of the return center]”). Meanwhile, it is also part of their work description to report to the authority level if, for example, a individual living at the center does not follow the rules.

RC1: ‘Everything that happens at an asylum center can have an impact on a resident’s case in one way or another. This may mean that the person in question may have their case reassessed and that [the authorities] will reconsider whether the person in question should in fact be a resident in Denmark. But it may also lead to the consequence that you can be moved to [another return center], for example. […] So, you [the resident] just must follow the rules and if you do not, then you can easily get in trouble.’

The example also illustrates the hierarchy of power from asylum seekers to care workers and then to the legal and formal rules and procedures. The RC care workers carry out tasks, such as reporting whenever a resident breaks “‘The House Rules”, that can lead to negative consequences for the resident. In these cases, the RC care workers expressed a need to prioritize their work duties and

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6 ‘The House Rules’ is a set of rules made – and signed by the Prison and Probation Service and specifically mentioned in both the legislation on repatriation for foreigners without legal residence (The Return Act) applied the 26.05.2021 (Ministry of Immigration and Integration Affairs, 2021) and the contract between the DIS and the Prison and Probation Service on accommodation and maintenance of rejected asylum seekers and others (The Danish Immigration Service., 2022).
the formal rules of the asylum procedure in favor of their personal beliefs or emotions:

RC1: ‘DIS looks through LetAsyl [the RC case management system (see Figure 2)] for a month and then they say... [...] And then they see all the reports and [ask] why is there no police report on this? So, and it’s really down to the very last detail. So, it’s not like we [RC] can just say: No, we don’t have to [report] and stuff like that. There is a [higher] body that keeps an eye on it [reports], because it is an important part of this concept around the return center... It is not a holiday colony... Or a place where you just have to stay. But it is actually a place you have to leave.’

A Danish return center rests upon a framework and bureaucratic rules that are built on restrictive policies. RC5 reminds us how “it’s not about fences and bad conditions… that’s not the key! – It is the asylum policy that should be the core concern!” We see in our empirical data how this political framework, based on restrictive asylum policies, many times contradicts RC’s professional ambitions for humanitarianism and for carrying out their conception of care. The next two snippets from the first author’s fieldnotes illustrate the RC care workers’ struggles of care. Together these examples show two situations where the notion of care leads us to the notion of limit as the RC care workers are prevented from fulfilling their ideal of care—meaning creating “a safe, meaningful and dignified stay”:

Example 1: It is early morning and I [the first author] just arrived to [the name of the return center]. I go to the coffee machine in the kitchen in the RC office building. Here I start small talking with RC3. RC3 tells me about one of “her residents” (RC3 is this person’s contact person to this resident), who came from [another return center] to [this return center] about a month ago (to be closer to family), and suddenly has to move back to [the other return center] - already on Monday (it is Friday, so after the weekend). The resident is on so-called “tolerated stay”.7 People that fall into this category are not supposed to stay at [name of return center]. RC3 tells me that the booking department in DIS may not have been aware of this when agreeing to let this person move to a center closer to family. Suddenly, while we are talking, employees from the Danish Prison and Probation Service enter the RC building. They are coming to talk to RC3 to let RC3 know that RC3 needs to make sure that the resident

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7 A person on tolerated stay is an expelled person who is however considered to be at risk of persecution if returning to their home country. This person will therefore not be deported. Instead, this person is "tolerated" in Denmark but will however not get a resident permit and is required to live at a return center and on a daily or weekly basis report to the police.
is made aware of this move today, so they [Prison and Probation Service] can pack all of this person’s things and send them to [name of an asylum center] so the resident will have the things when arriving. This seems like disturbing news for RC3 who appears frustrated, while informing the employees from the Danish prison and Probation Service that RC3 finally established a good contact with this person, and [RC3] therefor will not be the one pass on this message to the resident. RC3 will however go and talk to the resident afterwards to make sure that person is okay.

This and the example below highlight the care worker’s dilemma of both having to follow bureaucratic rules and procedures and at the same time feeling empathy with and wanting to support the individuals living at the center. It illustrates how RC, as an organization, must submit to both the concept of neutrality and uphold their contract with the Prison and Probation Service.

The example below, also shows how caring involves a commitment to act. Here, the RC care worker’s motivation to act arises out of frustration and concern. Even though the RC care worker will never be able to understand how it feels to be in this person’s unbearable situation, the RC2 is attentive to it.

Example 2: I [the first author] am at my new office at [name of the return center] that I share together with RC2. A woman enters [the door to the office is always open whenever RC2 does not have a meeting with a resident]. She is here to inform RC2 (RC2 is this person’s contact person) that she is to be deported back to Syria the day after. RC2 seems very surprised about this message. This woman has adult children with residence permits in Denmark. She has had her residence permit revoked and has since lived at this return center for a long period. It seems like RC2 knows the woman quite well. RC2 can tell that she is scared (RC2 informs me afterward). The woman has not been given any financial support from the Return Agency other than 50 dollars for a cab to the airport. RC2 seems frustrated. RC2 looks resigned and compassionate for the person while telling her that all RC2 can do at this moment is to try and call both the Return Agency and DRC to find out if this can be right. It turns out to be the case. RC2 gives the person a heartfelt hug while letting the resident know that RC2 thinks that she is tough…

Through our empirical data, we show how care in an asylum context has to do with complexities and ambivalence. It has distressing dimensions (e.g., the care workers feeling disturbed and frustrated), which need to be ignored in favor of the restrictive rules within the system. To avoid burnout and compassion fatigue, caseworkers’ care work might entail a removal of the affective when their conception of care exceeds the boundaries of what can be done within the restrictive
system and the law. The caseworkers still try to ease the difficult circumstances, even if it is far from an ideal solution.

The above example also illustrates how care is not necessarily verbal. “It may involve putting a hand on an arm at just the right moment” (Mol et al., 2010, 10). RC1 explains to the first author that “what is spoken is not always the most important thing. Body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, etc. are often just as important for understanding each other” (RC1). RC5 shares a thought in a meeting with the other care workers: “We must in our work accommodate the feeling of powerlessness—because we cannot solve the situation [for the resident]”. RC4 reflects in relation to this: “I think we all sometimes get a little too involved—but where we really do not have any say”.

Asylum caseworkers are accountable to both the individual applying for asylum and the political system. From our empirical data, we learn about the caseworkers’ double and paradoxical roles as both supporters, working to offer the care possible within the institutional boundaries and as a monitoring body, obliged to produce data about the rejected/asylum seekers—data that enter asylum casework systems (Figure 2). Our study shows how caseworkers walk a thin line, balancing bureaucratic constraints while collaboratively seeking for spaces for the enactment of care. This dual function of simultaneously supporting rejected/asylum seekers, while being obliged to report them if, for example, they do not follow the rules of the asylum system, triggers a sense of ambivalence. Thus, when investigating how care is enacted as a relational aspect of data production for asylum decision-making, we must acknowledge that data about asylum seekers are produced in moments of ambivalence—moments of ambivalence that affect and shape which data about the rejected/asylum seekers are produced and enter casework systems, and which do not.

5.2 Care as translating the decision-making process

Navigating the Danish asylum system is extremely demanding and complex for the displaced individuals seeking asylum, as we learn from our empirical data across all three work settings. In this complex process, we find that DIS case officers, DRC legal and return counsellors, and RC care workers are key to data production and translation to make applicants aware of how data are produced, what data are relevant, and what criteria are used to assess the data produced through different artefacts (i.e., the application form) and events (i.e., the asylum interviews). Translation is not only critical to making asylum seekers aware of formal procedures for data production but also to making asylum seekers aware of the importance of translating their accounts into relevant and credible data for decision-making. We learn how care is enacted as the concrete work of translating the decision-making process, including the data work that asylum casework entails, for the asylum seeker.
From the moment an asylum applicant applies for asylum at the DIS to when the decision on their application is reached, applicants might need to wait for several years, and sometimes even longer. During this period, applicants are expected to move across some of the (at the time of the study) twelve asylum centers in Denmark. Throughout the asylum process, data about the applicant are being produced, as the applicants interact with many different institutional actors e.g., the police, DIS case officers, NGOs, and municipality workers. As part of the procedure, we learn that applicants are often asked to hand in their digital devices and sometimes their passwords for their social media accounts, and that data from these sources can be used to document their case. However, our empirical data suggest that the methods and means of data production and how these data can be used as part of decision-making are largely unclear to the applicants.

An RC care worker informed the first author that “some of these people do not know what the hell is going on” (RC5), which resonates with a statement from a DIS case officer: “It is so insanely complex to understand what it takes to be granted asylum and from where and why and in which cases” (DIS6). Furthermore, by following the work of the RC care team and the DRC legal counsellors we also experience first-hand that the asylum applicants experience the asylum system as complex and difficult to navigate:

Asylum applicant: ‘We did not understand the significance of having our fingerprints taken. If I had understood the meaning, I would never have placed my fingers on the glass [the applicant cries].

DRC12: ‘Unfortunately, it does not matter to your case whether you knew it or not…’

Another asylum seeker living at the return center is confused and frustrated after receiving a letter from the DIS and therefore seeks guidance from RC2: “It’s all very unclear to me. It is incomprehensible to me…” To the asylum seekers, the asylum system is a “black box”: an obscure and long-lasting procedure consisting of practices that vary according to factors that seem confusing and unclear.

RC and DRC strive to translate the process by explaining the different phases with words, pictograms, and diagrams. More importantly for the translation process, they strive to explain important aspects that applicants need to consider. In some cases, this translation process is literal, since applicants who do not speak English or Danish require an interpreter to help them communicate by, e.g., translating the asylum motive they described in the application form, or interacting with the DIS case officer during the asylum interview. In some other cases, asylum caseworkers engage in translation processes as they make applicants aware of what practices are used in the processes of producing data for their case.

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8 https://asyl.drc.ngo/for-asylsogere/det-danske-asylsystem/praktiske-oplysninger/
In addition, caseworkers engage in producing data for decision-making based on the applicant’s narrative of their case. We learn from our empirical data that many asylum applicants arriving in Denmark have gone through complex and often traumatic experiences. The asylum procedure seeks to identify, unfold, and put into words these experiences so the DIS can use them for decision-making. Therefore, data are not simply gathered or collected but also to a high degree produced and co-constructed through processes influenced by authorities and NGOs using different artefacts and events (e.g., the asylum application form, the applicant’s phone and through interviews). Asylum caseworkers support applicants to become familiar with the procedure and make them aware of the importance of providing consistent and coherent information without any divergences.

We find that caseworkers have different approaches for supporting the asylum seekers to navigate these often opaque complexities of the asylum system. For example, some DIS case officers contextualize the asylum interview in legal and procedural frames, emphasizing the severity of what they are going to go through and how their attitudes, the information they provide, and the information they do not provide in the interview can impact the asylum decision. Other case officers kick off the interview without providing such an introduction:

DIS6: ‘They [the applicants] need to know how important it is ... Well, if they say something that is not true, then it can be used against them. They must also know that if they are not actively taking part in informing their case, then it is also to their own detriment. So, because – and it might sound harsh to start out with those things, but in reality, it’s also just very fair/real, I think, to tell them how harsh this legislation is. So, it’s an insanely important conversation and what they say is just really important, right. It is just as much a reassurance that it is a safe space and that what we write down is preserved safely and we have a duty of confidentiality. […] And we do it [guide the applicant] very differently because not everyone does it at all. Someone hands over the guidance to the interpreter and then the interpreter just pulls it off and then the interview starts. Well... there we find our own approaches.’

As part of the asylum procedure, the DIS case officer needs to start by informing the applicant about their rights and obligations: “So, we start [the interview] by going through a guide about the form and content of the asylum case. That is, the fact that they are obliged to speak the truth and state their own case” (DIS6). However, the method of conducting the interview is left to the case officer’s discretion. We learn that there is not a formal plan, procedure, or process on how to support the applicant in comprehending and thus navigating the asylum interview other than a written formal guide explaining the overall form of the interview, including the applicant’s rights and obligations.
DIS6: ‘And that’s what I think is important. That we create a space where they are given the best opportunity to inform their own case. But that does not mean that I... that I help them with their asylum case. That’s not what it means. It just means that I help them to state their own claim. Well because, it’s really up to them. It is not up to us to state their claim. We must give them the opportunity to do so, right. [...] And it’s really difficult for people to have to tell something about their life if they feel scared or unsafe.’

From our empirical data, we learn that DIS6 finds it important to offer an honest and detailed translation on the “harsh legislations” (DIS6). The DIS case officer can choose to let the interpreter read aloud the applicant’s rights and obligations. However, from our fieldwork, we learn that DIS6 chooses to be the one to thoroughly inform the applicant about the important aspects to keep in mind when navigating the asylum interview. It is central for this caseworker to create a “safe space” (DIS6) in order to establish the best possible grounds for the applicant to report their asylum motive “sufficiently for us to be able to believe it” (DIS6). DIS6 also clarified to the first author that this creation of a safe space and how the individual caseworker chooses to support the applicant has no influence on the final assessment:

DIS6: ‘However, the decisions, as I see it... the decisions will not be any different if we approach it in a... I do not know if you can call it... in a caring way... a respectful way, where we talk and we face them and we are polite and friendly and flexible if they need a lot of smoking breaks or if they need to clear their head every 20 minutes or... In other words, the outcome of the case is no different than if we approach it in a harsher way... or more such a regularly and a distant way. So, the decision will ultimately be the same. So why not approach it in a respectful and caring way?’

DIS6 explains that the way in which the asylum interview is introduced and conducted does not influence the outcome. However, DIS6 also acknowledges that the way in which the applicant tells their story may have an impact on informing the process of decision-making:

DIS6: ‘That is, the better you are at telling your story, the more likely it is that your case will be sufficiently informed for us to be able to believe it. Where for some [applicants]... Well, for some it’s just super, super challenging - but that does not mean that they are not telling the truth... not necessarily.’

According to DIS6, an emphasis on creating a safe space for the applicant is often crucial for the applicant to feel comfortable to talk more freely about
topics “that are extremely taboo”, which can be decisive in the decision-making process:

DIS6: ‘Everything from pre-marital relationships or abortions or rape, sexuality, gender identification, female circumcision. So, there are really many topics that are very delicate and something that they have never before put into words and talked about. And that is also what makes our work difficult.’

From the interview with DIS6, we learn that the setting for how data for decision-making are produced—meaning for example how the applicant is approached and how the interview guidance is delivered by the caseworker—might in fact influence the asylum applicant’s ability to talk more freely about sensitive asylum motives and thus their ability to construct a relevant, coherent, consistent, and sufficiently documented claim for asylum.

Our empirical data also shows that DRC legal counsellors are crucial when it comes to making the applicants aware of data that are relevant in the decision-making process. In this way, the legal counsellors not only support the applicants in making their claim, but also in ensuring the claim contains relevant, coherent, and consistent data:

DRC1: ‘When we [DRC legal counsellors] offer early counselling, we always hope to catch people before they have filled out the asylum application form. Because people, they do not know how important this part of the asylum procedure is for their case.’

The DRC offer their support to the asylum applicants both early on and during the asylum procedure, but also after a person has been rejected asylum. The DRC legal team provides counselling over the phone, via email and video call, in person by appointment at their office in Copenhagen or in prisons, as they strive to meet in person with imprisoned asylum seekers. “More and more people [asylum seekers] are imprisoned and deprived of their liberty. More and more counselling is therefore being held around the country’s prisons” (LC7 and LC1). Every weekday the DRC’s phone line is open and once a week their door is open for people to stop by to have their questions answered by a legal counsellor. Here, the DRC report to the DIS the types of questions asked by the asylum seekers. DRC8 clarifies how it is often easier for the asylum seekers to reach the DRC by phone than the DIS. DRC3 elaborates about the importance of informing the asylum seekers about how all the little details they enter for the asylum claim are crucial for the asylum decision-making:

First author: ‘What do you experience that rejected asylum seekers would have liked to have known at the beginning of the asylum procedure?'
DRC3: Well, for example information about how important those details are. So, what does it mean when the applicant says: Well, it was a big car. And then the DIS case-worker says: What do you mean by a big car? And is the car red or green? In other words, it is important that the applicant can remember all the details. And say only things they remember. If they are in doubt, they must make sure it says so in the summary: I think it’s like that, but I’m a little in doubt. You must make sure that it is in the minutes! So, it does not say in the minutes that it was a red car. So, information like that, people would have liked to know - among other things. And then also information about being at the first interview. They [DIS] say: Well, you just must tell us briefly about your asylum motive. But what does briefly mean? It’s important for us to explain to them: Well, you must describe to them [DIS] all the elements of your asylum motive. It may be that you shouldn’t inform them about details about when they were inside to search your house. But you must tell that they searched your house 5 times... So, it may well be that it is not until the next interview that you will explain exactly about the searches.’

We learn from our empirical data that relevant information must be consistently and coherently provided by the applicant to the DIS throughout all phases of the asylum procedure. “Divergent explanations in the asylum motive lead to credibility rejections” (DIS1 and DIS2).

The examples above and below also show care as a relational aspect of casework as DRC takes on the role of informing the applicant of the most crucial, according to the DIS, aspects of data production, namely that consistent and coherent data equate to relevant and thus credible data.

DCR3: ‘The problem is that sometimes when we come to ‘Early Counselling’, they [the asylum applicants] have already filled out the asylum application form. And they have already been to the first interview. And what we then usually say to them it is: Well, write to them [DIS]: I have been to early counselling. I have been made aware that I should have written about all these things. I had just understood it as in the way that I were to write less detailed. However also this and that happened. So, that information is added to the case before the 2nd interview.

First author: Yes, so it is clear that there will be a further explanation?’

DCR3: ‘Exactly. I have been made aware that I should actually have told you about all the things that I have experienced. I have not done that.

First author: So, that information thus becomes important “new substantial information’ rather than divergence?’

DCR3: ‘Exactly. Yes. Because if they come to the 2nd interview and they have not talked about it until then, then they [the DIS] will say: Well, why did you not write about this in the asylum application form? Why did you not talk about it at the 1st interview? And then it does not matter that the applicant says: Well, I was not allowed to talk about it in detail. They say: No, you did not, but you had still been told to talk about all your experiences. So, you did not. Why do not you not do that? But what are they to tell [in the application form and at the asylum interviews]? It might be a bit of a mystery to them, right.’

[…] I can give an example. Almost 90% of the women who come [to us] say that they have no idea that it may be relevant to asylum that they have been exposed to FGM [Female genital mutilation]. That they have been sexually assaulted either by government officials or... And then you tell it afterwards [after they have filled in the asylum
application form] and then they say: But why have you not told me before [filling in the asylum application form]? Or something relating to incest, for example. It is not directly an asylum motive, but you cannot tell a person who has been exposed to incest to seek protection at their family, for example. Or at least you should not do that. We've had cases where this kind of information first comes to light when the person is in return position. Those are obvious reasons, right. Well, you also know from Danish cases and European cases that this is not the first thing you mention when you come in contact with authorities.

The example above illustrates the critical role of the DRC legal counsellor in identifying potentially missing relevant data in the asylum motive registered about the applicant. We find that the DRC translates between the DIS and the applicant, making the applicants aware that they should contact the DIS and complete their asylum motive with additional data that are necessary for a relevant, consistent, coherent, and thus credible asylum claim. In this case, the translation process not only entails supporting applicants in looking at their personal accounts through the lenses of relevant asylum motives, but also involves translation and attention to subtle cues that might add important details to these personal accounts.

In practice, asylum decision-making happens through several translations from the moment data about the applicant are produced and until the data are interpreted and used by the DIS case officers to make a decision. During the asylum process, data about the individual applying for asylum are produced, shared, and interpreted across asylum NGOs and case officers. Data from our fieldwork show how the production and co-construction of data can change depending on the caseworker’s approach and the setting. We argue that care enacted through translation can make a difference in producing relevant data, meaning data that fall into any one of the three categories justifying asylum (newtodenmark.dk, 2021a), and data that are consistent, coherent, and thus credible data.

We learn from our empirical data that care is enacted as the concrete work of translating the decision-making process to the asylum seeker, including the data work that asylum casework entails. Thus, when investigating relational aspects of care in asylum casework, we must acknowledge that data about asylum seekers are produced though processes of translation—processes of translation that affect and shape which data about the rejected-/asylum seekers are produced, and which are not.

5.3 Care as being attentive to “new substantial information”

A Danish return center is a place where rejected asylum applicants stay, either because they have been rejected asylum (they need to leave the country) or they have been granted a so-called “tolerated stay” (they cannot leave, but they cannot
freely live in DK). However, we learn from our empirical data that “a rejection is not necessarily a rejection. Some [asylum seekers] are still granted a residence permit while living at the return centers” (RC1).

Being granted a resident permit while staying at a return center requires “exceptional conditions” (LC8) and rarely happens. Still, we argue that these rare cases are relevant from a care perspective because they show how resilient aspects of care are enacted at the margins. They illustrate that enacting care in data practices requires countering or supplementing data production and thus case documentation.

From our field work, we learn that reopening an asylum case that has been rejected by the RAB requires that “new substantial information” comes to light. In asylum decision-making, where most cases are rejected due to diverging information in the asylum claim, it is important to distinguish between “diverging information” and “new substantial information” to understand what it takes for a rejected asylum case to be reopened. In the transcriptions below, two DRC legal counsellors elaborate on the concept of “new substantial information”:

DRC1: ‘It’s a hair’s breadth, right. It is a very classic issue in asylum law - that you have the information, but if the person already mentioned it before, then they [RAB] will say: Well, that is not ‘new [substantial] information’. We have used this information as a basis [for the decision]. We knew of this when we made the decision, so we do not have to make that decision again.’

Another DRC legal counsellor gives an example of what kind of information could be classified as “new substantial information” and therefore could be grounds on which the RAB would consider reopening a rejected asylum case:

DRC3: ‘This decision is from 2018, but now the situation in the home country has suddenly changed. [...] Or some new information that the asylum seeker comes with: Threats on Facebook or yes... something where you say, well now something new has come up.
First author: So, this is what one would call “new substantial information”?
DCR3: Yes. Exactly. Or they’ve [the asylum applicants] done something here [in Denmark]. Then they have suddenly been in some demonstrations where they have been demonstrating. And their name has come up, right. Because they have been interviewed by the news.
First author: So, something like this could mean that the case could be re-assessed by RAB?
DRC: Yes.’

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This excerpt suggests that information about a new situation in the applicant’s life, which had not yet occurred when the person first applied for asylum, can be characterized as “new substantial information”. Additionally, new information about a situation that happened before the applicant fled and applied for asylum can potentially be characterized as “new substantial information”.

Identifying “new substantial information” requires knowledge about what data are relevant as well as a particular commitment to care. More specifically, asylum caseworkers need to be responsible and attentive to recognize sensitive information that might have been overlooked or recently added. In addition, they must possess the integrity to react and respond to support the applicant to translate this information into relevant, coherent, and credible data for the decision-making process.

Our empirical data show that NGOs are not formally part of the asylum decision-making process, however they implicitly collaborate with the DIS around assembling a case in situations where “new substantial information” comes to their attention. For example, an RC care worker explained on one occasion to the first author:

RC1: ‘So, a return center is not necessarily a center that you travel away from. But yes, of course, everything that happens at a center can have an impact on a resident’s case in one way or the other. It may be that the person in question may have his or her case taken up again and one considers whether the person in question should not in fact have a residence permit in the country. But it may also have the consequence that you can be moved to [the other return center] in Denmark, for example. It can be said that it [name of another return center in Denmark] is perhaps more a return center than this center. Although, there are also people who get a residence permit while staying at [name of another return center in Denmark].’

Important here is the distributed nature of data production, co-construction, and data sharing in the asylum decision-making process. Data about an asylum seeker’s case is mainly produced in the interviews with DIS case officers. However, in the example below, we see how the processes of data production and assembling an asylum case also relies on trust and the kind of relational work that is not necessarily possible in the common interview setting. “We equip them to better handle their everyday life and to be able to handle the fact that they are in the so-called departure position” (RC2). The relational care work enacted by the NGOs potentially enables the production and sharing of “new substantial information”, which can be crucial for a rejected applicant’s case. RC1 and RC2 elaborate to the first author:

First author: ‘And this ‘new substantial information’, could that by any chance be information that has come to light through the RC, for example or...?’
RC1: ‘Yes, that’s possible. It can have come to light in many different ways. It may basically be a woman who has been sexually abused for many years but who has never
talked about it because it has been too shameful. So, then she has just been talking [to the DIS and RAB] about something else…'
First author: ‘So, this [‘new substantial information’] may have come up in a conversation with RC2 for example?’
RC2: ‘Yes.’
RC1: ‘Yes, it might. Because there are also some relations of trust, you could say. That is, some relations that can cause something to be said. And there may be some people living here, who say something to us where we then say; Hey, what is it you are saying?’
RC2: ‘Hmm… exactly.’

These empirical data suggest that care as a relational aspect of casework has the potential to open a space for trust between the rejected asylum seeker and the RC care worker. This relationship of trust can in some cases provide the, in this case rejected, asylum applicant with better understanding of the asylum decision-making processes and what the possibilities are for supplementary data. In a situation like this, the RC care workers support the asylum applicant in the sense that they are attentive and help raise awareness about other asylum actors, e.g., a lawyer or a DRC legal counsellor, who might be able to use potential “new substantial information” that has come to light in a moment of trust. This is further elaborated by RC1 and RC2 in the below transcript:

RC2: ‘I coordinate so they communicate with the right body. And so, of course, I get a lot of knowledge and insight into a lot of different things, but I’ve never ever taken on the role that I shouldn’t take.’
First author: ‘But in that way, as I hear it, then... [I weigh my words] then your work may well have an influence on... the asylum case? It might have an influence on a change in the asylum decision?’
RC2: ‘Well, we can at least draw attention to possibilities and limitations. So, for example... if a resident tells you something - or tells me something... or I can tell that someone is saying something, then I can make their lawyer or the DRC aware of it; the fact that there is someone who says this and that. It’s not for me to change anything, but then they [the lawyer or the DRC counsellor] can take action regarding this new information.’
First author: ‘Okay.’
RC1: ‘Or the best way is to inform the resident: You know what, I think you should go down and talk to the DRC or I think you should call your lawyer.’
RC2: ‘Yes, so it always goes through the resident.’
First author: But the work you are doing - as I hear and understand it, may not have been done [by the DIS or the RAB] - that is, this care work, which may create some trust and give some courage for some new information to come out... information which is actually crucial for an asylum case.
RC1: ‘Yes, which can be crucial? Yes, that we can agree on! That is completely correct. Yes.’

In the elaboration above, the first author was presented with a concrete example where care created a moment of trust between an RC care worker and a rejected asylum seeker, which then gave a rejected applicant the courage to provide supplementary data. In this case, our empirical data shows how care
constitutes an openness and attentiveness to the unpredictable and unlikely. The first author talked to both the DRC and the RC about this particular case. The following transcript is from the first author’s field notes from the return center:

A woman flees her home country with her children because her husband is abusive, and he tortures them. They seek asylum in Denmark. However, because the woman is not aware of women’s rights, she gives the DIS a different asylum motive. While their case is being processed by the DIS, they are moved from the asylum reception center to an asylum accommodation center. While staying here, the DIS rejects them asylum. They dare not travel back to their home country, therefore they move to a return center where they stay for about 1 ½ years. During their stay at the return center, the woman tells an RC care worker, in a moment of trust, about the actual reason why they fled their home country. She also informs the RC care worker that she, while staying at the accommodation center, gave this information to the RC health clinic, which did not act on this information. The RC care worker advises her to talk to the DRC about this perhaps “new substantial information”. DRC hear her story and ask the woman for consent to collect the health data from the RC clinic to use in the construction of data in assembling this “new important information” to send to the DIS. The DRC send the request to the DIS who then reconsider the case. The DIS assess the new data as “new substantial information” (not as diverging information) and grant them asylum. Finally, they are, after being more than 4 years in the system, granted Individual protection status, as the DIS assess that they are at risk of being subjected to torture if they return to their country of origin.

Our empirical data suggest that the care enacted by RC as a relational aspect of their care work has the potential of making the asylum seeker capable of supplementing data, meaning bringing “new substantial information” to light. In this regard, the RC care worker has a rather close collaboration with the DRC – both the DRC return counsellors present at the center and the DRC legal counsellors working at the DRC main office. This informal collaborative work across NGOs was also confirmed and exemplified though another example while conducting fieldwork at the DRC main office:

DRC3: ‘Well, for example a woman who has been rejected asylum. Her ex-husband has been granted a resident permit. They have a child together. But her ex-husband wants her out of the way and their relationship is completely skewed... However, she has a lawyer who helps her in the family court to secure contact with the child. There is a good collaboration with the municipality. And that is, among other things, due to the [RC care worker] who is on the case. […] So, that way we exchange information. And then I managed to secure her a family reunification permit because that collaboration worked so well. Because the fact that she was finally granted at family reunification was because she was able to spend time with her child.'
First author: And where the work of the RC was a decisive factor?
DRC3: Yes. Because otherwise we would not have the good contact to the municipality and the flow of information will just be far too difficult. And that’s the thing with these kind of cases.
First author: And is it such a one-time.... Uh... or is it something you have experienced several times that...?
DRC3: It’s rare... Well, but when it’s these cases… There are some special enthusiasts [RC care workers], because in reality, it’s a bit dangerous to talk about such an example, because they [RC] goes a little beyond their role... And so, do I. And we all do it to make this happen. So, it also shows just how hard it can be. With this flow of information, right? Because it is quite important for me to know that the municipality wants to help this person. Because the municipality actually thinks it’s relevant that this mother is in the child’s live, right? Because if it was not for this flow of information, I would only have the argument to work with that the ex-husband is trying to get her out of the country...

First author: But in that way, one can say, that the work the RC has done in this case, has influenced the decision?
DRC3: Yes, it has. But it also just shows how vulnerable it is, right. Because these are actually a child that could have been neglected and a mother who could be [deported].... So, if this work had not been done, then it was a mother who had been refused asylum and refusal of family reunification. Then she had just been sent out of the country and then she had lost touch with her child. And that is despite the fact that we have signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, right? Which means that a child has a right to both their parents."

This conversation with DRC3 contributes empirical insights to the understanding and meanings of care in an asylum casework context as it shows how relational aspects of care practices such as attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, and integrity supplement the production of data about the asylum seeker. The “new substantial information” that makes the asylum case sufficiently documented is produced, co-constructed and shared through affective labor and socially supportive data work across the municipality, RC, and the DRC. When investigating relational aspects of care in asylum casework, we learn from our empirical data, that we must acknowledge that data about asylum seekers are produced though caseworkers’ attentiveness to “new substantial information”.

Based on our findings, we continue the next section by discussing the difference in case documentation when recognizing care as important for data production.

6 Discussion: Care as an aspect of quality in data production and case documentation

In this paper, we investigate how care is enacted as a relational aspect of data production for asylum decision-making. As we set out to discuss this matter of care, we draw attention to the difficulties of characterizing what constitutes care.
From a formal perspective, caseworker practices tend to be described in bureau-
cratic terms, whereas care for the individual is harder to capture and describe. 
Even so, caring is critical in a datafied society, as care (or the lack of care) in 
casework shapes the production of data and thus the case documentation, we 
argue in this paper.

Aligned with Puig de la Bellacasa, (2017), we seek to unpack how care is 
enacted in the situated context of asylum decision-making, instead of producing 
value assessments on what caring means. Thus, with this study, we add to CSCW 
research of care by expanding the research sites of care. Following Kaziun
as et al., (2017), we build on care as a relational aspect of casework, arguing that 
an applicant’s ability to navigate the asylum process is interdependent with the 
production of relevant data.

Our analysis contributes to the concept of care by showing how ambivalence, 
translation, and attentiveness to “new substantial information” impact the pro-
duction of data about the asylum seeker. At the same time, our study illustrates 
how these three dimensions of care also contribute new insights into prior studies 
of data work (e.g., Bossen et al., 2019; Møller et al., 2020) and casework (e.g., 
Roberts 2007; Saxena et al., 2021, 2022).

Building on this strand of research, our study shows the asylum casework-
ners’ dual role of having to balance bureaucratic constraints while collaboratively 
seeking spaces for the enactment of care. Our empirical data exemplifies how 
asylum caseworkers across three different settings enact care as a relational 
aspect of casework when producing data about asylum applicants. We learn 
that this data work is often carried out in moments of ambivalence—an ambiva-
lence, characterized by tensions in the caseworkers’ way and ability to exercise 
care in a highly politicized and bureaucratic system. Thus, this study also builds 
on a strand of research that highlights the complexity of care (e.g., Sevenhuij
jsen, 2003; Mol et al., 2010; Sciannamblo et al., 2021; Vlachokryikos et al., 
2021). Our findings suggest that asylum caseworkers struggle to maintain a bal-
cence between support and policing of rejected/asylum seekers because their 
reporting role tends to dominate, and this influences and thus shapes which data 
about the rejected/asylum seekers are produced and enter casework systems, 
and which do not.

The empirical narratives of this study exemplify how data production is a 
socio-technical process. Our study builds on prior work by showing how the con-
cept of translation (Dombrowski et al., 2012; Passi and Jackson, 2017; Verde
zoto et al., 2021) also impacts the production of data. We find that, following Passi 
and Jackson, (2017), it takes translation work to make data work, (2017, 2438).
In the context of health, Verdezoto et al., (2021) show how translation work is 
not a simple or straightforward task. Instead, it is a situated practice, involving 
“many different tasks to fill in the data” (p. 12). In the context of services sys-
tems, Dombrowski et al., (2012) highlight mediation as an important concept in
information-rich organizations, since it allows for fostering a process, bridging relationships, and providing broader scaffolding (p. 1977).

In this paper, we argue that translation is key in data work since it brings to the fore an important aspect of care impacting caseworkers’ documentation. Asylum caseworkers produce data to construct an asylum case. In an asylum system that increasingly relies on data from various sources, asylum applicants become data subjects through varying relations, interactions, and dynamics between humans and technology. Displaced individuals applying for asylum are shaped through various data practices.

Our findings illustrate that asylum caseworkers strive to translate the asylum system and its sometimes “black box” procedures. In other words, they are caring for displaced individuals in the act of de-black-boxing, for example, by helping them navigate and by explaining the importance of providing consistent and coherent data about their case without any divergences. Thus, in the context of asylum, we characterize translation as a relational aspect of care in casework that affects and shapes which data about the rejected-asylum seekers are produced, and which are not.

We extend the growing body of work that attends to discretionary and situated practices in data work (Passi and Jackson, 2017; Holten Møller et al., 2019; Petersen et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2021). Following this line of work, our study calls attention to the socio-technical practices of producing, and using data – practices that require interpretation and contextualization of data. In this context, we learn from our empirical data, that data about asylum seekers are produced through caseworkers’ attentiveness to “new substantial information”. We find that this relational aspect of casework has the potential to open a space for trust—especially in cases where particularly sensitive asylum motives, for example, gender-related issues, depend on trust, time, and personal relationships.

Certain practices are, or are not, embedded into the collaborative workflow technologies (e.g., caseworker systems) used in asylum decision-making. Winner (1980) reminds us how technical artifacts are inherently political, suggesting how politically infused social systems shape how and which types of tasks are built into asylum casework systems. When certain supportive aspects of casework are not explicitly formally defined and built into the system, they are invisible. In this study, we learn that support for the asylum applicant in navigating the asylum process is not formally built into the system. Here, asylum caseworkers have different starting points and approaches to supporting applicants.

Asylum decision-making requires data work, involving humans producing, curating, analyzing, and interpreting data. Data about the asylum applicant that ultimately influence the asylum assessment and thus the applicant’s future are constructed in a socio-technical process through mechanisms that may or may not support the applicant. Accordingly, the data that inform asylum decisions are (following Pine and Liboiron, 2015) imbued with assumptions, judgments and
values that potentially influence the direction of the asylum motive. What data are produced, or not, can depend on the individual caseworker’s style of supporting (or not supporting) the asylum seeker, we argue.

6.1 Reinforcing status quo while compensating for inadequacies

Another question for CSCW research into care is: What does it mean to carry out professional care in a humanitarian organization, such as 1) RC, hired in by the Prison and Probation Service at a return center and, 2) the DRC, which formally collaborates with the Return Agency (The Return Agency [Hjemrejsestyrelsen], 2022b) and whose return counselors also have offices at the return center? The RC care team agree to practice their work under the Prison and Probation Service’s rules. This means that they (in some way) also accept the current political agenda in which the DIS is obliged to operate. Regardless of whether the RC care team aligns with the current political agenda, they are in the position of maintaining and implementing the procedural conditions that uphold conditions for rejected asylum seekers living at a return center in Denmark.

Ticktin, (2011) writes about “the politics of care” and how the “danger is that in pretending to be outside power, unarmed, power is wielded without acknowledging it and therefore often without accountability” (p. 20). RC seek to offer the best possible care and to do good; nevertheless, by working for the Prison and Probation Service and thus the DIS, RC are “instituting repressive measures in the name of care” (Ticktin, 2011, 20). In a way, RC reinforce the status quo: the established order based on the current restrictive policies. Does RC pretend to be outside power or does RC actually know they are a channel of power? One might speculate (hence, the debate about the asylum domain and if it resembles an industry (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sørensen, 2013; Hamilton Byrne et al., 2023)) as to whether the mere presence of the DRC and RC in the return center legitimizes the harmful practices and structural conditions carried out by asylum authorities. Or whether these two humanitarian organizations are put there by authorities to ensure compensation for inadequacies of the asylum system – or in other words, the lack of accountability.

RC follow seven principles, one of which is the principle of neutrality. This means that the RC cannot engage in disagreements of a political, racial, religious, or ideological nature. If RC does not comply with this principle, they may risk their cooperation with the asylum authorities, which in the worst case will make life even more unbearable for the people who live at the centers. At the same time, RC’s work also, to some extent, actively preserves this complex, political (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2017; Byrne and Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2020), bureaucratic, and increasingly data-driven (Molnar and Gill, 2018; Molnar 2019) asylum system.

In this context, our findings show how (some) RC care workers, DRC legal- and return counselors, and DIS case officers compensate for the
restrictive policies and opaque complexities of the asylum system by supporting the displaced individuals applying for asylum on how to navigate. Our findings illustrate how human relational care is many times essential for the displaced individuals’ ability to find their way through the data-driven system and to make sense of its complex rules, procedures, and what is needed for their asylum case to be sufficiently documented.

In this paper, we recognize the delicate balance of making these relational aspects of care in asylum casework visible. We chose to make visible this compensating affective labor and care work, as we argue for a greater focus on care in increasingly data-driven asylum casework. Why? Because it is difficult to assemble a puzzle without having a picture on the box. In this study, we find that asylum casework is not simply data processing. Rather, it requires “the passion that understands the pulse of life beneath the official version of events” (Lee, 1998). Following Eubanks, (2017), “caseworkers [at their best] promote equity and inclusion by helping [asylum seekers] navigate complex bureaucracies and by occasionally bending the rules in the name of higher justice” (p. 195).

Our empirical data suggest that the asylum system today, with its increased focus on data and data-driven technologies, needs the crucial affective human labor and relational care, meaning the more informal and invisible part of the work of RC care workers, DRC legal counsellors and return counsellors, and DIS case officers. The production of data and the construction of the asylum case happens in settings where caseworkers are the power holders. The asylum caseworkers not only produce data about the rejected- / asylum applicant but are also doing the work of interpreting and contextualizing data, adding to combining datasets, and helping data move to different asylum offices.

We argue that it is fundamental to make visible, and thus to a higher degree than now legitimize, the informal care practices enacted in asylum casework, which are increasingly distributed and driven on opaque data production, analysis, and interpretation. For an asylum case to be sufficiently documented, it requires that people applying for asylum understand what data, how data, and why data about them are produced, interpreted, used, and shared. They need translation from the asylum caseworkers to set the framework and to draw up a map of the asylum system’s many opaque and complex bureaucratic rules and procedures.

The relational aspects of care in casework are essential, we argue, as they are precisely about setting a frame and showing empathy, bridging, building trust, meaning, and compensating for the inadequacies or technological fixes that often appear in formal procedural data-driven systems and processes (Eubanks, 2017; Benjamin, 2019). By merely ignoring these crucial aspects of care in asylum casework, we risk impairing data quality, for example, the context of data. Thus, following Bowker, (2005, 184): “data should be cooked with care”, as it is only when the individual asylum seeker and the caseworker can both navigate the
process of data production and thus case construction that an asylum case (perhaps) can be sufficiently documented.

6.2 Implications for design

The broader implication of this research relates to the increasingly technological gaze on care work (Karusala et al., 2021). In an increasingly data-driven asylum system, the invisible act of care as an aspect of casework is progressively challenged and thus is the asylum seeker’s agency, meaning the applicant’s power to sufficiently document their case with relevant and consistent data. Data registration processes, biometric data collection, data from social media and so on inform a vast part of the asylum system (Molnar and Gill, 2018; Andreassen, 2020; Rask Nielsen and Holten Møller, 2022). People applying for asylum must place a great deal of trust in both the authorities and NGOs working side-by-side in their host country. Whether the applicant identifies with their digital double or not, the data production and caseworker’s interpretation will affect the decision-making and thus the applicant’s asylum case.

Design decisions have an active role in enabling or constraining democracies. A critical stance on digital technologies within societies contributes to a growing corpus of work in CSCW, where researchers, caseworkers, and other stakeholders converge (Vlachokyriakos et al., 2021; Menendez-Blanco and Bjørn, 2022). “[N]ovel technologies are reproducing the logics that devalue caring labor and justify a lack of care infrastructures for marginalized communities” (Karusala et al., 2021, 339). Eubanks, (2017) reminds us that “high-tech tools that protect human rights and strengthen human capacity are more difficult to build than those that do not” (p. 212). In this context, our study opens space for future research to ask, for example: What should not be automated in asylum decision-making? For those processes that are/will be automated, how can we take a sensitive approach to the design of collaborative technologies and enable processes that serve the practices of care that we make visible in this paper?

We see the different stages of the asylum procedure (Figure 1) and the various casework systems (Figure 2) being used by and across the various asylum authorities and NGOs as central starting points for setting the ground for future follow-up work. Exploring how the identified aspects of relational care work are undertaken at different stages of the asylum procedure and in the various casework systems and how they pertain to data production would extend critical perspectives on care and data work in CSCW, we argue.

Puig de la Bellacasa, (2010) describes how “[e]thical obligation to care stands against ‘neglect’” and that “[n]eglect is what happens when the doings of care are not attended” (p. 164). With this study, we push the agenda of strengthening care practices in increasingly data-driven and distributed asylum casework. In other words, we find that relational care as an aspect of casework is crucial in facilitating the production of data. Consequently, we suggest that, if we are
to design care technologies for supporting displaced individuals to navigate the asylum procedure, this system should make room for relational aspects in distributed casework—at both authority and NGO levels. Such care technologies (e.g., a further development of ASYLYMDK; an app developed by the DRC to support asylum seekers in Denmark\footnote{https://m.apkpure.com/asylumdk/dk.drc.asylumdk}) should be sensitive to supporting asylum seekers in minimizing divergent data through processes of translation, while also attentively seeking relevant data that might constitute “new substantial information” for sufficiently documenting their case.

7 Conclusion

This study adds to CSCW research of care by expanding the research sites of care in data work. We investigate how care is enacted as a relational aspect of data production for asylum decision-making. The study is based on an ethnographic inquiry into a specific domain of agencies of care, namely asylum caseworkers, who operate in a complex, political, bureaucratic, and increasingly data-driven asylum system.

Our study contributes to the body of CSCW research that recognize data as already cooked. We unravel and articulate dimensions of care as relational aspects of asylum casework. Based on our ethnographic field study, we offer empirical data narratives exemplifying how data production in asylum casework is a socio-technical process and how there is no such thing as raw data.

We contribute empirically grounded insights into the meanings of care in a datafied asylum context. Our empirical data narratives illustrate how care is enacted by caseworkers in moments of ambivalence, translation, and attentiveness to “new substantial information” relevant for asylum decision-making. In this context, we show that where and how data are produced matters for how the asylum case is constructed. In this complex asylum procedure, we find that DIS case officers, DRC legal counsellors and return counsellors, and RC care workers are key to data production and to making asylum seekers aware of how data are produced, what data are relevant, and what criteria are used to assess the data produced through different artefacts (i.e., the applicant form) and events (i.e., the asylum interviews).

Paying attention to other sites of data production, for example, ‘sites’ beyond the interview process, shifts our understanding of quality data. The relational aspects of data production, we find, are enacted in the situated process where caseworkers “care” that asylum seekers know how to navigate the system. The paper in this sense points to the specific ways in which asylum caseworkers enact care within the boundaries of the asylum system, both
individually and collaboratively, in order to ensure that a case is sufficiently
documented.

By making this informal and invisible care explicit part and parcel of data
work, we argue for a focus on care. Why? Because the political structural con-
ditions that are shaping casework today are also shaping the development of
new data-driven technologies to support asylum casework; thus, we seek to
describe and expand a theory of care as a design material and condition for
quality data.

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