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Coping with Vulnerability: The Limbo Created by the UK Asylum System

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Abstract

Upon arrival in the United Kingdom (UK), asylum claimants undergo a complex application process with no guarantee of being granted leave to remain. Throughout this process, applicants live in 'limbo' with no certainty regarding their future. They are forced into poverty, are at risk of destitution and often live in substandard accommodation, all of which causes further harm, compounding the circumstances from which they have fled. This paper explores the stress and vulnerability faced by male asylum seekers during the application process and how they cope or resist vulnerability during this time. Based on narrative interviews, this research finds that the most stressful experiences for participants include living in 'limbo' throughout the asylum application process and beyond. As such, many coped by using distraction techniques, seeking support and through cognitive restructuring.

Keywords

Asylum seekers; refugees; stress; coping.

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Introduction

Asylum seekers are a vulnerable population facing extraordinary circumstances and increased levels of stress (Phillimore et al. 2007). When discussing vulnerability, this paper does not use the term in the commonly used sense of a passive victim (Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay 2016). Rather, it considers it in terms of the political, economic and institutional restrictions placed upon asylum seekers (Watts and Bohle 1993), while exploring how participants resist such restrictions. The paper first discusses the literature that explores the harms caused by policies relating to asylum seekers in the United Kingdom (UK), arguing that they create vulnerability and stress. This includes the harms caused by the asylum application procedure itself as well as the circumstances in which asylum claimants in the UK are forced to live. This paper also discusses the psychological effect of these harms on male asylum seekers in the UK, and how they cope with these emotional demands. Based on narrative interviews with four men from Libya and Iran, the findings show that while foreign and immigration policy causes harm that results in stress, some people circumnavigate the system and find ways of coping with these demands. The paper also discusses the role of third-sector organisations in providing resources to help asylum seekers cope with and resist the constraints placed upon them.

Harmful Policy in the UK

Foreign and immigration policy in the UK is detrimental to the lives of asylum seekers in many ways, causing harm even before the point of migration and lasting long into resettlement. Before migration, foreign policy can affect the citizens of a country. For example, in 2011 the UK and France intervened in Libya, originally to protect its citizens from the Gaddafi regime. In the previous year, Libya had the highest Human Development Index ranking in Africa (United Nations Development Programme 2010). Based on flawed intelligence, the aims of foreign intervention quickly escalated to regime change without adequate consideration of a post-Gaddafi Libya (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee [FAC] 2016). Following intervention, the country descended into war between militias and tribes, and saw political and economic collapse. For its citizens, this resulted in untenable living conditions and human rights violations (FAC 2016). Since then, the conditions in Libya have forced citizens to flee their homes. In addition to an estimated 303,608 internally displaced people (International Organization for Migration [IOM] 2019), the UK has witnessed an increase in Libyan nationals seeking asylum since the 2011 intervention (UK Home Office 2019). Evidently, then, UK foreign policy directly affects citizens abroad, causing some to flee to seek safety.

The strengthening of borders through visa restrictions and carrier sanctions on transport companies forces many asylum seekers to avoid air travel and seek other, more dangerous routes (Webber 2004). In turn, this has caused a significant number of migrants to die as they attempt to bypass border control (IOM 2020). Once migrants arrive in the UK, they are subject to immigration policy that is intertwined with criminal law, therefore, outlawing aspects of immigration (Aliverti 2012). People who seek asylum in the UK are bailed under the *Immigration Act 2016* and can have conditions placed upon them such as reporting to the Home Office periodically. The practice of bailing asylum claimants alongside the threat of immigration detention is criminalising and stigmatising.

Assessment of asylum claims creates further vulnerability. For example, the UK Home Office (2015) is reliant upon evaluating the credibility of asylum applicants when making decisions (Jubany 2017). These judgements are made within a 'culture of disbelief' (Anderson et al. 2014; Jubany 2017), in which there exists an underlying assumption that asylum seekers are 'bogus' (Cohen 2001). Such an approach can provoke stress and negative emotions, causing individuals to feel invalidated (Schock, Rosner and Knaevelsrud 2015). Asylum interviews can subsequently trigger traumatic memories when undergoing intensive questioning during interviews, which are likely to be exacerbated when faced with disbelief (Schock, Rosner and Knaevelsrud 2015). Therefore, the process that should be helping those in need can cause further emotional vulnerability.

Following a substantive interview, asylum seekers in the UK wait for a decision, which can span for years, despite the aim to process claims within six months. Indeed, extended waiting periods have been found particularly stressful for claimants (Reesp 2003; Sinnerbrink et al. 1997). Aside from the negative effects of the uncertainty of waiting, throughout this period asylum seekers are faced with insecurity of residency status as well as inadequate support from services, all of which constitutes social harm and increases vulnerability (Pemberton 2015: 28–31).

Social exclusion caused by restricting asylum applicants' rights only further extends vulnerability. Housing is one of the instruments of social exclusion, prohibiting asylum seekers from permanent residency and choice in where they live (Pearl and Zetter 2001). Provision of accommodation is often in deprived areas of poor quality, and use of temporary dispersal accommodation means asylum seekers can be moved multiple times before settling into long-term accommodation (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee [HAC] 2017). Social networks are important in promoting inclusion; however, dispersal policy fails to promote such connections. Stress is increased due to temporary or poor housing, and this is often compounded with reduced possibilities to create social networks, causing relational harms (Pemberton 2015: 30; Spicer 2008).

The prohibition of employment infringes on the capacity of asylum applicants to act autonomously, creating further harm (Pemberton 2015: 29). It also facilitates social exclusion and forces asylum seekers into poverty (Oxfam and the Refugee Council 2002), while contributing to negative mental health outcomes (Allsop, Sigona and Phillimore 2014; Gower 2016; Laban et al. 2005). Restrictions on employment are considered a source of stress for men who find it particularly challenging to remain idle, as they are unable to live up to the gendered expectations of themselves, being the financial provider of the family (Healey 2010; Renner and Salem 2009). Unemployment also prevents the development of social support networks and increases isolation, reducing the coping resources available to asylum seekers (Liebling et al. 2014).

How the Asylum Process Affects Stress and Coping

One key consequence of the harmful asylum system is increased stress. Colman (2015: 734) defined stress as a 'psychological and physical strain or tension generated by physical, emotional, social, economic, or occupational circumstances, events, or experiences that are difficult to manage or endure'. When a stressor (i.e., something that causes anxiety) invokes a stress response, individuals employ coping strategies in an attempt to overcome, minimise or tolerate worry. Coping strategies are behaviours or thoughts that mediate the effects of stress on health and wellbeing (Skinner et al. 2003). For asylum seekers, coping becomes a way to overcome or resist the vulnerabilities caused by the harmful effects of life in exile. Here, I briefly explore one of the most common coping strategies found within the literature: support seeking.

Family support is crucial in facilitating coping, particularly during times of life crisis and transition (Schaefer and Moos 1998; Skinner et al. 2003). However, the findings regarding family support among asylum seekers are inconclusive (Berry 2006; Laban et al. 2005; Schweitzer, Greenslade and Kagee 2007; Spasojevic, Heffer and Snyder 2000). Where families have been separated or relatives are deceased, asylum seekers are forced to be less reliant upon them to cope (Schweitzer, Greenslade and Kagee 2007). In such cases, grief or concerns about family can cause rather than reduce stress because the fleeing family member is concerned about those they left behind (Laban et al. 2005). In addition, migration and resettlement can add strain to a relationship, which can also increase stress (Berry 2006; Spasojevic, Heffer and Snyder 2000).

Friends are a further source of social support (Schaefer and Moos 1998; Skinner et al. 2003). Support from others who have shared experiences has proven benefits for asylum seekers, notably by reducing isolation and providing a listening ear (Behnia 2015). Further, sharing experiences with others has been found to facilitate the resettlement process and aids coping with the stress of migration (Simich, Beiser and Mawani 2003; Liebling et al. 2014). Although this form of support is ordinarily an adaptive coping strategy, some

research has found that participants were exploited by their peers (Crawley, Hemmings and Price 2011; Cuthill, Siddiq Abdalla and Bashir 2013). However, the participants in these studies were failed and destitute asylum seekers and, therefore, may be at greater risk of exploitation due to their circumstances (Crawley, Hemmings and Price 2011; Cuthill, Siddiq Abdalla and Bashir 2013). Another negative effect of friendships was found where peers in similar circumstances had been deported, which created fear and distress in those who remain (Liebling et al. 2014).

A third resource used to facilitate coping is accessing support from third-sector organisations. Some studies have found such services are useful in providing practical support (Cuthill, Siddiq Abdalla and Bashir 2013), but falter in their assistance with asylum claims (Liebling et al. 2014). Other research has found that asylum seekers were averse to approaching support services due to distrust and the fear of adversely affecting their asylum claim (Rider 2014).

Research Methods

This research sought to understand how the asylum system in the UK fosters vulnerability and stress in male asylum applicants, and how individuals cope during this time. To do this, narrative interviews were conducted with four men. Participants were selected according to the inclusion criterion of having leave to remain after applying for asylum. This condition was selected because the participants had experienced the asylum application process from initial application to eventually being granted status. Here, Rider (2014) suggests that during the asylum process applicants cannot present it as a stressful event; therefore, those who have been successful in their claim may be more likely to share their experiences.

All participants were recruited through a refugee aid charity that gives support and advice to asylum seekers regarding the asylum process, poverty and homelessness. Support can also include immigration advice from qualified caseworkers, practical advice regarding asylum support and accommodation, as well as signposting to other services such as language classes and legal and medical help. A caseworker at the organisation invited all participants who had recently been granted leave to remain and were still in contact with the charity. I was a volunteer for the charity at the time of the research and had no previous contact with the participants. However, to ensure they were aware of my position within the organisation, I informed them of my volunteering. While I acknowledge the ethical implications of my position, they are beyond the scope of this paper.

The participants were four males, two of whom were from Libya and two from Iran. All had been granted leave to remain after claiming asylum in the UK. The two Libyan men were both married and arrived with their families, and the two Iranian men were unmarried and did not have children. All participants were given information regarding the nature of the research and signed a consent form, both of which were given in English and interpreted for the one participant who could not read English well enough to understand. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the research prior to giving consent.

Narrative interviews allowed the participants to disclose what was important and meaningful for them, with minimal input from the interviewer (Gadd 2012; Hollway and Jefferson 2000: 31). The asylum process itself follows a set of procedures that should be equal for everyone; although, in practice people's experiences are unique. By using narrative interviews participants were able to attach their individual experiences and interpretations. Moreover, narrative interviews offer insight into the internal and external as well as the construction of the self, therefore, providing greater understanding of the motivations behind one's coping behaviours (Ward and Maruna 2007: 85). Having adopted a narrative approach to interviewing, there was no formal interview schedule. Interviewees were simply asked to share the stories of their asylum journeys. Further questions were posed in response to what the participants had disclosed, asking them to expand on what they had said or what happened next. A thematic approach to the analysis was subsequently adopted to identify the overriding themes emerging from the data (Bryman 2008). This method of analysis has been found to work well with under-researched

areas (Braun and Clarke 2006). Finally, the data were coded by hand before organising codes into groups, from which the study themes were identified.

Findings

All four men in this study had different experiences of the asylum system, from being granted status very quickly, to being refused and later accepted following the submission of a fresh claim. Despite these differences, several themes emerged with regard to the stressors and coping strategies employed. The most stressful part of the asylum process was living in 'limbo' while waiting for decisions and again during the period immediately following a positive decision. Some of the coping strategies used by these men included distraction, help from others and cognitive restructuring.

Living in 'Limbo'

All participants described feeling as though they were living in 'limbo' while waiting for a decision on their asylum application. This drove feelings of fear and insecurity because the participants did not know what was going to happen to them. Ibrahim¹ said 'it was very difficult because we wanted to get a decision and then not be in a state of limbo'.

All of the men were unable to settle while they waited for a decision and felt as though they were living as a semi-citizen. Mahmoud talked about the limited rights and restrictions placed upon his freedom and likened this to being in prison:

You feel like you are in prison. I mean, if I put you in this room, for example, give you everything—food. I lock the door on you. You have everything—internet, TV, what else? Any kind of food. Also, we still in prison. You don't have the freedom to do everything. This is one of the problems.

Although these challenges spanned the entire process, the period between the substantive interview and receiving a decision from the Home Office was identified by participants as being the most stressful part of application:

Everybody knows is that the mission from the Home Office just to refuse you, not to give you. So that means that you [are] waiting for the refusal decision and you're just waiting for it and you don't know for how long. (Rahman)

A sense of 'limbo' was particularly prevalent during this time with the additional anxiety of knowing a decision was imminent. Rahman described the anxiety of checking his mail every day, convinced the decision would be negative.

A positive decision brought only momentary relief before another period of 'limbo' and vulnerability to homelessness and destitution. Although participants described the waiting period as the most stressful time, three of the men spent a larger proportion of the interview discussing the difficulties that followed a positive decision. For example, Mahmoud described the waiting process as being the most stressful point of seeking asylum, but the current stressors of finding a source of income and securing a place to live were more immediate problems:

But now the problem is ... it's the money problem now, the money problem. Because the—when the Home Office stop the [National Asylum Support Service], and asking to move accommodation and you don't have another source of money.

Rather than feeling relieved, all four men faced increased vulnerability to homelessness and destitution. This is a consequence of lacking move-on support for asylum seekers who have been granted leave to

remain. The participants may have discussed this at greater length because it is current and risks the stability of basic needs, which was previously met by the Home Office throughout the asylum process. While this period caused such marked harm, those interviewed were actively trying, using various coping strategies, to resist the constraints of the system and reduce the negative effects on their wellbeing.

Distraction from Vulnerability

Using distraction as a coping strategy was the most prominent way to manage stress caused by the asylum process. Distraction is a coping strategy in which people divert their attention from a stressful situation by engaging in a variety of activities (Skinner et al. 2003). Research shows that male asylum seekers participate in activities outside of the home as a means of distraction (Renner and Salem 2009). In addition to distraction from stress, these techniques also fulfil the need to be useful and maintain one's masculinity (Abi-Hashem 2006; Cuthill, Siddiq Abdalla and Bashir 2013). Laban (2015) argues that it is not only engaging in activities as a means to occupy oneself, but also being in another environment among others and overcoming isolation that contributes to reducing stress. All participants discussed the importance of 'keeping busy' by attending ESL classes, engaging in sport activities or voluntary work: 'I was trying to occupy myself with some jobs or something. Attending ... classes, trying to de-stress yourself with some other activities' (Ahmed).

Ahmed made the explicit link between stress and the coping strategy used to counter it, and further listed different ways in which he employed this tactic. Another participant described why he engaged in ESL classes and voluntary work:

I started volunteering because I don't have the right for any kind of employment, as you know, and I start studying ESL, which is the only thing that you should, or that you can, study. Err, actually in my country I'm an electrical engineer for more than 20 years of experience. I used to work in oil and gas industry for about the last 10 years, you know, but here you have no right to work. (Rahman)

In this short passage, Rahman identifies the stressor, the coping response and the reasons for employing that reaction. He mentions his limited rights and the restrictions placed upon asylum seekers. By further identifying his status in his country of origin he is reinforcing a positive memory of his previous life and contrasting it to his present as an asylum seeker. In doing so, he is emphasising the gravity of the problem. He fled his home country to seek asylum because he and his family were at risk of harm, yet in this aspect of his life he was in a better position *before* he fled. Rahman has a strong command of the English language and did not need to attend ESL classes. He previously had a career, so he did not need to undertake voluntary work to obtain work experience. The emphasis on his work ethic and the restrictions placed upon him highlight the importance of employment in terms of masculine identity, which has been noted in the literature (Abi-Hashem 2006; Cuthill, Siddiq Abdalla and Bashir 2013). Here, Rahman negotiates and navigates the system to maintain his self-identity as a working man. The problem is that there are restrictions placed upon his freedom, the coping response is to engage in activity and the result is maintaining his sense of self. His identity has repeatedly been suppressed by asylum policy and practice. The resulting consequence, particularly of voluntary work, was that this participant felt good about himself and gained a sense of pride from giving back, while enabling the maintenance of his sense of identity. This supports research that suggests employment is part of the identity of many asylum seekers (Cuthill, Siddiq Abdalla and Bashir 2013), and further deems volunteer work a potential facilitator of maintaining this aspect of self. This is also consistent with Gower (2016), who suggests that allowing asylum seekers to work would avoid the negative effect on mental health and self-esteem due to extended exclusion from the labour market.

Help from Family and Friends

Each of the men had different experiences of family. Three of them were in receipt of financial or housing support from extended family shortly after arriving in the UK. Only the two Libyan men mentioned having immediate family with them in Britain and both were married. One said they were 'a family man' whose wife sometimes supports him 'and sometimes I support her' (Ahmed). Indeed, this was the only indication disclosed by the participants of emotional support provided by family. The two men who did not mention immediate family being in the UK did not express yearning for their support, but did discuss a desire to visit family. Therefore, the lack of support exhibited by participants may be due to the barriers of travel restrictions. This was noted in Schweitzer, Greenslade and Kagee (2007), who found that while family was a strong source of support pre-migration, they were less influential in assisting with coping post-migration due to separation.

Instead of receiving support from spouses, emphasis was placed on the responsibility of being a husband and a father. These duties added to the stress felt by the two participants who had their families with them in the UK. They expressed how love for their families added pressure to ensure their needs were met. While there were occasions in which one's spouse helped them cope with the asylum process, more frequently they would rely on other coping strategies to relieve stress. Further, and contrary to alleviating stress, the asylum process could place additional strain on personal relationships:

My relationship with my wife was, you know, in the worst. And the problem is, even though after that we get the positive decision ... because of those days when we were waiting and we were under stress and we were under tension, our relation in the family, I think, I'm not sure but I think that it's not gonna be as good as before because, you know, it's like, kind of broken glass—you never can get it again. (Rahman)

The stress was so great that the participant described a lack of hope that his relationship would return to its pre-migration state, further exemplifying the effect of long asylum processes on individuals' personal lives. Research undertaken in the United States among Bosnian refugees found a relationship between PTSD and marital problems (Spasojevic, Heffer and Snyder 2000). This research extends this and suggests that the asylum process can also create marital strain. For Rahman, he perceived his relationship with his wife to have been healthy before but now damaged by the stress of seeking asylum.

Another explanation for marital difficulty in this context is the differences in acculturation between spouses, which further strains relationships (Berry 2006). In the case of Rahman, he was the only adult in the household with proficiency in English. Therefore, it is likely he had a different acculturation experience to his wife:

I mean, got some stress ... I am in charge, but I am responsible for that. My wife don't speak English very well, [so] I need to do everything by myself. Even if she want to go to hospital I need to go with her, if she—somebody need to come to the house to fix something I need to be at home.

However, rather than the acculturative stress described by Berry (2006), Rahman suggests that the burden of responsibility resulting from a difference in language skills put additional pressure on his marriage.

In the wider coping literature, family is viewed as a strong source of support (Skinner et al. 2003). Yet, in addition to the stress of the asylum process on all family members, asylum policy also promotes an environment that encourages maladaptive coping behaviours. Three of the participants had been moved several times, often at short notice, limiting opportunities to build social support networks and increasing social exclusion, in turn. Despite this, maladaptive coping behaviours were not apparent among the participants. Instead, they resisted the constraints placed upon them and sought support outside of the home. Friends were mentioned more frequently than family when discussing coping strategies, especially

in terms of emotional support. This was consistent among all four men. For example, Ahmed explained 'friends ... can express for you feelings ... more than, you know. I can say to my friends some things I cannot say to my wife'.

Here, the participant clearly expressed the distinction between his friendships and his marriage. Both married participants had previously expressed the need to be 'strong' and maintain responsibility for their family but felt comparatively more able to open up to their friends. This finding is also consistent with Healey (2010) who presented a gendered perspective of coping strategies among asylum seekers in the UK, finding that men were more likely to seek social support outside of the home.

The men in this study shared their experiences of the ways in which their friends supported them. All participants found that social experiences encouraged them to form bonds with other asylum seekers. These friendships were frequently formed when attending ESL classes, through shared accommodation and in diasporic communities. In resisting exclusionary policies, friendships facilitated coping in a number of different ways, from identification to emotional support. For example, Ibrahim found 'some friends they help me. They help me a lot ... 'cos some of them are in the same situation. I mean, we try to help each other.'

The shared experiences of the participants and their friends provided a bond that nurtured the formation of trusting friendships. Support was mutual and facilitated coping, both through receiving social support and by being of service to others. Supporting friends appeared to reduce stress, as it gave participants a sense of usefulness—an aspect of identity that is often absent in asylum seekers due to exclusion from employment (Healey 2010). This differed from familial relationships, as friendships were perceived as mutual engagements without the attached responsibilities of a dependant family.

Support from a Refugee Aid Charity

Despite the additional pressures on family life and barriers to forming friendships, participants sought other sources of support from third-sector organisations, including the charity through which participants were recruited. The men found various ways to use this support to help cope with the pressures of asylum. In particular, the charity helped individuals to achieve their basic needs such as housing: 'It was difficult but then the charity² helped us and we weren't homeless. We had bedroom where I safe' (Ibrahim).

All four participants had sought, and found, support on a practical level from the organisation. This was usually in the form of assisting with housing or financial support from the Home Office. Homelessness and destitution, or the threat of it, is a frequent occurrence among asylum seekers (Cuthill, Siddiq Abdalla and Bashir 2013; HAC 2017). As a response to this stressor, seeking practical support was a consistent method of coping among all participants in this study. It was also the reason for them initially contacting the organisation. This supports the findings in Cuthill, Siddiq Abdalla and Bashir (2013) who found that when faced with destitution, asylum seekers were more likely to look for support from charities they trusted as opposed to statutory agencies.

The reason another participant initially contacted the charity was for information about the asylum process. This participant had been living in the UK for a while as a student when the situation in their country of origin deteriorated. His student visa was no longer valid, and he had to decide between claiming asylum and going back to Libya, which would put himself and his family at risk of serious harm. The respondent spent weeks agonising over this decision. To help mitigate this stressor, he sought information to (1) help him decide and (2) help him cope with the stress this uncertainty caused:

I tried to seek an advice from some organisation here about, err, I have no idea about the asylum process. I tried to search on the internet, and I found that it's a nightmare— asylum process is a nightmare ... I been in touch with them, which asked me to come to show me how to apply and everything about asylum process. (Ahmed)

The participant attempted to seek the information he needed himself but found that the asylum system was complex. He then approached the refugee agency for support in obtaining the information he needed. In turn, this participant was able to make a decision that relieved the stress of his indecision and provided him with enough confidence to travel to London to begin the asylum application. Other participants similarly sought informational support from the organisation: 'It was very helpful that I would come to see the charity and I would show them the letter and they would go through the refusal reasons and they would help' (Ibrahim).

By understanding the asylum process, participants were better able to cope with it, in part, because it reduced their uncertainty. In seeking this type of support, individuals knew what should happen next and what the possible outcomes were. Although the results were out of their control, asylum seekers were armed with the knowledge to prepare for possible eventualities. In at least one case, seeking help in the form of information led to the development of other coping strategies such as cognitive restructuring. When someone receives information, they are able to practically plan or emotionally prepare themselves for the possible outcomes. Interestingly, this is inconsistent with prior research, which found refugee aid agencies to be unhelpful in assisting with claims (Liebling et al. 2014). That said, the men in this research derived satisfaction from the information obtained, which then prepared them for the result of their asylum application. The charity in which this study was undertaken also sought to empower asylum seekers to take ownership of their cases by training immigration advisors to give out professional legal advice.

The charity also provided emotional support that helped participants cope with stress. While practical and informational aid from the organisation was expected, emotional support was not one of its core aims. Here, one respondent described the meaning of this support: 'When I came here I had some, err, nice words from her, from people here—I mean, emotional, it help me. If they can tell you don't worry, you'll be fine ... that's enough sometimes' (Mahmoud).

This quotation is significant because there were only a few occasions in which participants acknowledged emotional coping responses. Where these instances were related to receiving help from others it was ordinarily from more intimate relationships with family and friends. These words provided reassurance and hope in what is otherwise a hostile environment. Their actions of practical and informational support combined with emotional encouragement offered hope for the participants, and further helped them to manage the stress of the asylum system. Where hope was felt, asylum seekers found strength to better cope with the issues they faced within the asylum process.

Further, participants spoke highly of the organisation, not only for the work they do but also for the personal qualities of the staff. Overall, staff members were praised for their treatment of clients. As Mahmoud described, one was: 'dealing with the case as if it's his case. He's working, you know, he's giving very nice examples of, very perfect example for humanitarian—how people should deal with the others'.

This is one example of how highly the participants thought of the charity staff. They referred to staff members by their first names and expressed gratitude for the support they had received. Mahmoud's sentiments exemplify the human face of the organisation and highlight its caring nature. All participants expressed this level of gratitude, thus, showing the magnitude of support received while going through the asylum application process and since being granted leave to remain. Indeed, the charity had helped participants in a number of ways, proving instrumental in facilitating coping among these individuals. However, given that all participants were recruited by the charity (referred to by respondents), the findings may be biased towards this agency. Nonetheless, they are relevant and important in identifying the multiple ways in which this type of support can be used both as a coping strategy and as an act of resistance towards the asylum system.

Cognitive Reappraisal

One of the ways in which asylum seekers used internal coping strategies was by cognitive reappraisal of either their stress or their situation, often by comparing their present with their past or future. Cognitive reappraisal is a coping strategy in which an individual consciously attempts to change their perception of a stressful situation to view it in a more positive light (Skinner et al. 2003). One method of cognitive reappraisal is cultural distancing, which sees asylum seekers maintain their sense of identity by favouring their own heritage and distancing themselves from their host culture (Doggett 2012). Instead of remembering the situation they fled, individuals recall the positive aspects of their country of origin, allowing them to maintain their cultural identity and reduce negative feelings of displacement and confusion (Doggett 2012). Conversely, individuals may distance themselves from their culture, choosing instead to view their current situation in a more positive light (Abi-Hashem 2006). Alternatively, individuals may compare themselves to others who are in a worse situation, which increases positive perceptions of one's own condition (Cuthill, Siddiq Abdalla and Bashir 2013).

One participant had disclosed how his relationship with his wife had deteriorated under the stress of the asylum process before repeating that 'it's OK', perhaps to reassure himself that the relationship is not as bad as he had previously described it to be: 'But the end it's OK, we are still alive. Surviving, struggling, but it's OK. At least I'm looking at the future of my daughters, you know, and how they are thinking and how they are thriving' (Rahman).

He acknowledged the extreme difficulty of being an asylum seeker yet minimised it by contrasting it with the dangerousness of the context from which he had fled. Further, both participants with families placed hope in the lives of their children, knowing that they would not have to go through what they had.

Another participant described his experience of arriving in the UK and being arrested and detained in an immigration removal centre. Upon being asked how he felt at that time, he responded, 'I was safe because I had left a country where my life was in danger so I knew I would be OK here' (Ibrahim).

Ibrahim did not know what would happen to him when he was arrested. He did not describe any fear or stress at this point but instead was relieved that he was no longer facing persecution or danger. To many people, this situation would provoke fear, stress and anxiety. To this respondent, these feelings were negated by the relief of being in a 'safe' country and having faith that the authorities would not mistreat him as they had in his country of origin. In comparing with his past, he minimised the effect of the present and was able to view his situation in a more positive light.

There were distinctions in the findings between Libyan and Iranian participants. For example, Libyan respondents held fond memories of their country and were proud of what it once was, with one even sharing how he wanted to shield his children from seeing what Libya had become. This contrasted the Iranian participants who were more critical of their country and its government. That said, this is likely because their reason for fleeing their country of origin was sparked by government persecution. The experiences of the Iranian participants are consistent with Abi-Hashem (2006), who suggested that one way men cope is by distancing themselves from their past and criticising their country of origin. Here, this behaviour constituted adaptive coping, as it allowed the participants to view their current situation in a positive light.

Another way of reappraising their situation was by comparing themselves with their peers. For example, Mahmoud explained how his 'friends were also dealing with their own issues, which were ... worse than mine. One of them was homeless. By being homeless they were trying to support me emotionally.' By comparing himself to others who were comparatively more disadvantaged, this participant was able to gain a more positive perspective on his own situation. In turn, this improved his coping strategy, as he knew his situation could be worse. Further, the fact that his friends were less fortunate than him and were still trying to support him was humbling and allowed him to draw strength from them.

Conclusion

This research aimed to gain an understanding of the coping strategies asylum seekers use while navigating the asylum process. In doing so, it revealed some important findings and contributed to a developing area of literature. First, the study identified key points of vulnerability and aspects of immigration policy, which have a particularly negative effect on asylum claimants—that is, living in limbo while waiting for decisions over a protracted length of time and the period immediately following a positive decision. Even when an applicant is successful in their claim, the asylum system still requires navigation and fight.

During these times, asylum seekers were vulnerable to stress due to the insecurity and instability of their situation. Identification of these stressors provides justification for policy change and provision of services for asylum seekers and refugees. The charity with which the researcher worked has recently piloted a program in which newly arrived asylum seekers are provided a volunteer who meets with them and offers information about what to expect at various points of the asylum process. This addresses the vulnerability caused by a lack of knowledge about the asylum process, which further causes stress. In addition, reiterating the stress of waiting for a decision emphasises the need for the Home Office to meet its target of processing asylum applications within six months. As well, this research adds further impetus to calls for the government to address the lack of support for newly recognised refugees (All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees 2017).

This research also exposed coping responses to some of these stressors, showing how some asylum seekers are active and not passive agents seeking ways to overcome the obstacles implemented by the asylum system. Distraction proved the most popular coping strategy used by participants. This indicates the need for agencies (either governmental or not) to provide voluntary work opportunities for refugees or to create social support networks that include activities, which offer some meaning in their lives during unemployment periods. While coping strategies within this family have been found in other studies, the narrative interview structure elicited in-depth data that provided links between these coping strategies and aspects of culture and identity. Overall coping strategies identified within this study were adaptive and none of the participants described mechanisms that appeared to be significantly maladaptive, meaning they were coping relatively well under their circumstances. While this is a positive finding, it must not be considered an indication that the Home Office and its processes and procedures are enabling this. In fact, the participants were incredibly reliant upon their support networks including friends, family and a charity that was supporting them. The role of a third-sector organisation was instrumental to prolonged survival, assisting these men in resisting the repressive policies enforced upon them. Had these coping resources not been available, the interviewees may have had to find alternative means and strategies.

This research has extended the literature by identifying and understanding some of the coping responses to specific stressors created by the asylum system. Once understood, researchers need to seek to reduce these triggers while increasing the resources available to asylum applicants. This knowledge can be deepened through greater understanding of how coping changes over the life course, and whether upbringing and experiences in one's country of origin influences the strategies asylum seekers routinely employ.

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¹ All participants' names are pseudonyms.

² Name removed to protect anonymity

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