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# What affects the mental health of people seeking asylum in the UK?

## A narrative analysis of migration stories

### 1. Introduction

To seek asylum is to ask for safety from a country which is not your own, because you are being persecuted for your race, religion, nationality, or membership of a social or political group. It is to subject yourself to a bureaucratic process which determines whether your story has credibility and if your life is truly under threat. It can require waiting for a decision from the UK Government while homeless or in temporary accommodation, without the right to work and with limited access to public services. In the UK there were, on average, 23,075 asylum applications per year in the five years preceding 2011, compared to 27,689 in the subsequent five years (Home Office, 2018). These figures reflect a broader trend in Europe of increasing numbers since the Syrian civil war began, with 309,040 asylum applicants in the EU in 2011 and 1,259,955 in 2016 (Eurostat, 2017a).

The process of seeking asylum has not changed significantly since 2002, though restrictions around asylum seekers have. For instance, in the early 2000's the UK Government introduced new fines on air and land carriers for taking refugees, began forced dispersal, and removed the right of people seeking asylum to work (Somerville, 2009). These changes reflected the emergence of a restrictionist set of policies and rhetoric where the asylum system is portrayed as being abused by "bogus" applicants who threaten state sovereignty as well as national community, and whose entry must be restricted (see Maughan, 2010).

Despite the numbers of people seeking asylum dropping since 2002, restrictionist ideas have strongly influenced public debate. For instance, in the recent Brexit vote, anti-immigrant sentiment was an important factor in people voting to leave the EU (Hobolt, 2016). However, there have been brief departures from this hegemony. In 2015, photographs of Aylan Kurdi emerged, a three-year-old Kurdish Syrian boy found dead on a Turkish shore after attempting to reach Europe. The UK Government subsequently began the Syrian Resettlement Programme in response to public protests. It demonstrates how voicing the human consequences of asylum policy is crucial for groups looking to improve the lives of people seeking asylum.

Many groups campaigning for migrants' rights, such as the Ice and Fire theatre company, aim to place migrant voices and experiences at the heart of their work. Ice and Fire work with asylum seekers to produce a verbatim text of their migration story, used in readings to support migrants' rights campaigns. They aim to inspire action by giving a holistic picture of a relatable person, not simply an 'asylum seeker' going through a process, but a person within the human experience of forced movement.

Narratives are a particularly good window into human experiences because not only does their content inform us, but so does how they are constructed and retold, what characters, settings and plotlines are used and in what order. They tell us how and why stories are retold with a specific audience or purpose in mind. By understanding experience through the nuances of narrative we can understand which factors might affect someone's well-being and mental health, as well as how they might best be supported.

Mental health and well-being can be conceptualised using the Royal Society for Public Health (2013) definition. This states that mental health and well-being consists of psychological wellbeing, emotional wellbeing and social wellbeing. Of particular relevance to this paper are the dimensions around psychological well-being which include 'a positive evaluation of oneself and one's past life (self-acceptance); a sense of continued growth and development as a person... and the belief that one's life is purposeful and meaningful' (p2). Identity loss after stressful life events, has been linked to reduced psychological well-being and may mediate the effect of stressful life transitions (Praharso et al. 2017). Forced migration is an exceptionally stressful life event involving a substantial life transition. Issues around identity may, therefore, be important to understanding the mental health and wellbeing of forced migrants. The social well-being dimensions of 'social acceptance' and 'social integration' are also relevant (see Keyes et al. 1998).

There has been some research using the narratives of people who have sought asylum. Korac (2003) looked at the narratives of 40 refugees who had fled to Rome, finding that the lack of official integration assistance caused significant hardship, though this contributed to refugees pro-actively expanding their networks and establishing social ties, particularly with Italians. Korac used narratives as data but does not draw on different narrative elements, such as settings and characters, to develop her analysis. Rather, Korac focusses solely on themes emerging from the data. In contrast, Bek-Pedersen and Montgomery (2006) used narrative analysis in their study with young refugees from the Middle East. They found that when adolescents connected experiences of violence with a wider sociohistorical narrative, it was easier to create new homes in exile. However, the authors did not consider how interpretations of past violence may be influenced by their ability to create new homes and thus, by factors

such as the asylum process. There has been little or no work, particularly in the UK, which uses narrative analysis to look at the intersection and continual interactions between narratives of forced migration, the asylum process and mental health.

A narrative approach appreciates how experiences are continually reformed in each retelling. This is because people learn new things, speak to different audiences and develop their identities with time. Thus, it's likely that post-migration experiences are heavily shaped through and connected with pre-migration ones, that pre-migration experiences are continuously reinterpreted in the light of post-migration ones, and that migration is experienced as an ongoing continuous story where characters and settings are constantly interacting through time, and re-experienced in a different way with each telling. As Eastmond (2007) contends in her summary of forced migration narratives, *'past experience is always remembered and interpreted in the light of the present... as well as the way the future is imagined'* (p249). Accordingly, the cited studies can be complemented by this study's approach; a narrative understanding of how asylum seeker migration experiences are constructed, understood in the context in which they were told.

Through narrative analysis, this study aims to understand how people seeking asylum make sense of their migration experience and how this influences mental health and well-being, by exploring how they reconstruct their migration experience when talking about events pre-and post-migration. This is important given the recent increase in people seeking asylum the UK and the traumatic experiences many have endured (Morgan et al. 2017).

## 2. Methods

This study centres on the analysis of three transcripts of face-to-face interviews conducted by Ice and Fire with people seeking asylum. People seeking asylum were interviewed by Ice and Fire staff between 2005-2017, with each interview lasting three to five hours. Ice and Fire recruited people through NGO contacts, people approaching Ice and Fire after one of their reading events (typically hosted by activist groups or charities), and people met in the context of a campaigning meeting or conference. People were asked to an interview on the basis that they had sought asylum, were eager to speak about their experiences and wanted to reform the UK immigration system. Interviews formed the basis of theatre readings conducted by Ice and Fire. Out of around 30 interviews Ice and Fire have conducted, three transcripts were chosen for analysis by Ice and Fire for convenience, as they were only in touch with a limited number of former interviewees to ask for their consent. These individuals had formed a close relationship with interviewers and had continued working with Ice and Fire staff after their interviews. Chosen interviews were conducted in English, a language in which the participants were fluent). A sample recruited through a campaigning organisation is likely to provide predominantly negative experiences of the asylum process. Though this does not provide a full range of experiences of the asylum process, some of which may be positive, it focuses in on the experiences most relevant to the research question. The aim of this paper is to understand what sort of experiences might harm asylum seeker mental health and well-being, not to provide a generalisable or complete range of experiences people may encounter.

Ice and Fire questions encouraged a chronological ordering of events, with a view to theatre adaptation. The chronological structure was set at the start of the interview where

interviewees are usually asked about their childhood and country of origin and, at a slightly later point, what led them to the UK. From here, the narrative naturally followed people's journey and experiences in the UK. Once the coda arrived, Ice and Fire interviewers asked about hopes for the future and a message for the audience. Most other questions were concerned with prompting the story along (variants on "What happened then"? questions), clarifying interviewee answers and asking for personal/emotional context.

Interviews with people seeking asylum were supplemented by two semi-structured interviews with Ice and Fire staff conducted in Autumn 2017 in person and on the phone, lasting about an hour. These two additional interviews conducted with Ice and Fire staff provided insight into the co-production of narratives, the motivation of people seeking asylum for participating and how the interview was carried out (e.g. recruitment). These interviews were transcribed and analysed separately to asylum seeker interviews using thematic analysis. The purpose of these additional interviews was to provide context, richness and increased understanding around the asylum seeker interviews.

Transcripts of people seeking asylum were interpreted using narrative and thematic analysis simultaneously, with each method informing the other (building on methods developed by Shukla et al. 2014). Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) stages. Thematic analysis identified cornerstones of interviewee accounts, making it easier to recognise narratives; revealed the cross-cutting concerns of interviewees, helping uncover the shared community stories used in narratives; and exposed how different experiences relate to each other, providing information about how narratives were structured. In turn, narrative analysis informed themes. For instance, characters used in narratives and representations of social

relations provided additional information about how interviewees felt about different themes. Narrative analysis was consistent with the way data was collected, with interviewers inviting asylum seekers to provide a chronological account of their experiences.

This study used an experienced-centred approach to narrative analysis (see Squire, 2008). This approach understands narratives as everchanging retellings of stories which reflect how someone feels about themselves and the message they want to give to the listener, who thereby collaborates in the production of the narrative. In this approach, non-event elements such as identity descriptions, third-person accounts, present-day reflections on past events and the broader socio-political context become important.

Narratives were analysed on the personal, interpersonal, positional and ideological levels as outlined by Murray (2000). At the personal level, we examine how individuals perceive the world, evaluate their social environment and whether a narrative has any therapeutic functions such as reconstructing one's identity after a traumatic experience. The interpersonal level is vital in helping us understand the co-construction of narratives, how interviewer questions and reactions affect the telling of the story, and what image the story teller wants to present to the audience. In the context of this study, the interviewee knows that their words are going to contribute to the creation of a play designed to challenge attitudes on migrants and refugees. Therefore, their account is less likely to reflect what they want to communicate to an imagined theatre audience as well as the interviewer. The ideological level observes how narratives draw on societal symbols and ideas to order the world and construct one's narrative. The act of migration involves substantial changes to a person's world. Consequently, migrants are likely to draw on shared stories either of other migrants, or from their own culture, to make sense of their new circumstances.

The positional level of analysis looks at the importance different social relations in the creation of narratives. In our study, this may involve looking at the difference in social power between



the interviewer and interviewee (such as immigration status), and how this might have affected the narrative. Interviewees may adapt their language to reflect the lifeworld of the interviewer while the interviewer might also be able to shape the narrative towards particular outcomes which interest them. Murray emphasises that all levels of narrative analysis are interlinked.

Every researcher begins research with preconceived ideas on a topic based on their identities and experiences. These attributes cannot be avoided, but it is important to acknowledge and reflect on how they influence the research. In addition to biasing researchers to certain interpretations, identities and experience can be also brought to bear in positive ways, for instance providing special insight into an area. The following discussion on identities and experiences, relates to the primary researcher:

I am involved in campaigns and charities around migrants' rights, the son of *[personal identifier removed]*, and have family and friends who have gone through the asylum process. This gives me an understanding of some of the issues raised in interviewee narratives. Equally, it means that I view the asylum process negatively and, thus, am more likely to notice issues. Moreover, my identity as *[personal identifier removed]* might also affect my ability to empathise with *[personal identifier removed]* (many of whom have been through gender specific experiences and trauma) and *[personal identifier removed]* (many of whom have had to flee because of their sexuality).

To raise awareness of alternative interpretations and perspectives, two asylum seeker transcripts were double coded. Any discrepancies in the perceived meaning of the narratives were discussed until a consensus was reached. For example, one interviewee described an

experience giving birth, where the nurse scolded her for calling an ambulance rather than taking public transport. The primary researcher took the interviewee's perspective and felt that this was a clear case of discrimination. The co-researchers, who had more experience working on issues around pregnancy, suggested that pregnant women, including those born in the UK, are asked not to take ambulances during labour unless there is an emergency. After a discussion, we felt that the interviewee was recounting not only an incident of perceived discrimination, but one which typified the isolation, loneliness and an unfamiliarity to a foreign culture they were feeling. Discussion allowed for the excerpt to be treated with greater nuance.

Ethical approval was obtained from the King's College London Psychiatry, Nursing and Midwifery Research Ethics Subcommittee for this study.

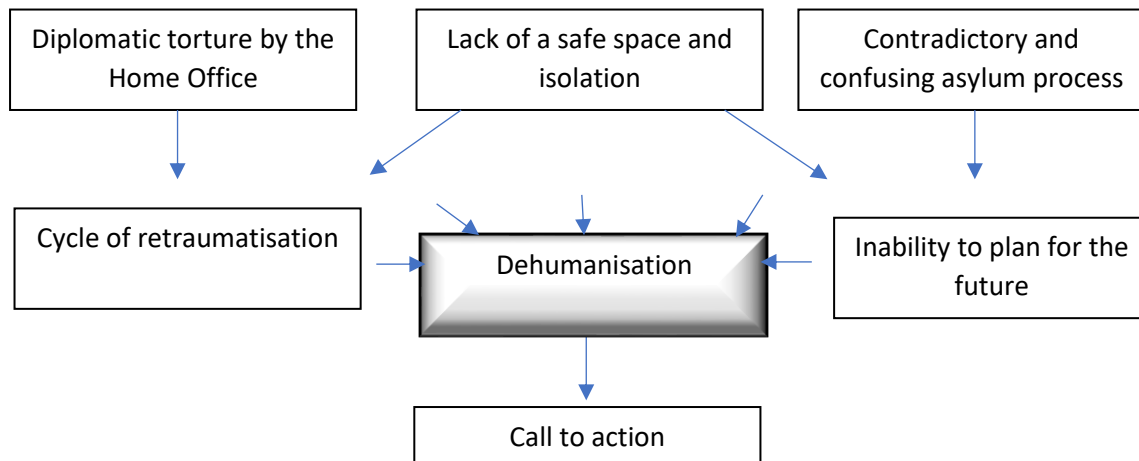
### **3. Results**

Three transcripts of interviews with people seeking asylum were analysed. All participants were from countries in Africa. They have been given the pseudonyms John, Shelly and Eve (names reflect their gender).

The results are organised by the themes described in **Figure 1** below. Within each theme, narrative positioning analysis is applied and the relationship between pre- and postmigration parts of the narrative explored. For each theme, different narrative levels are more or less prominent. Similarly, the interaction between pre- and postmigration elements of the narrative are more prominent in some themes. Information from the two additional interviews with Ice and Fire were used to add context, for instance on the recruitment process, the pre-

interview interactions between interviewer and interviewees, and the purpose of the interviews.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** describes the main themes arising from the analysis. Interviewees felt that the Home Office subjected them to diplomatic torture and a confusing asylum process, while making it difficult for them to find safe spaces. These factors contributed to retraumatisation and an inability to plan for the future. All these elements led interviewees feeling dehumanisation. This flowed into a call for action to change asylum seekers' conditions.

### **'Diplomatic torture' by the Home Office**

On the personal narrative level, interviewees perceived their social environment as one punctuated by the threat of deportation. This environment was banal bureaucratic and oppressive, with Shelly describing it as *'diplomatic form of torture'*. People felt they were always being watched. *'You feel like you are being monitored... it's like someone is following you with a stick'* (Shelly). This was part of the mental torture which characterises the asylum process for interviewees. They described living in fear and having to constantly be on guard; exemplified by the ordinary settings of fear used in narratives. *'It is like something is poking*

*you all the time ... you're on the bus, and you see police and you check – do I have my Home office card – yes I have and then you can sit comfortably' (Shelly).*

Difficult postmigration experiences are interweaved and interact with the premigration trauma interviewees endured. The diplomatic torture interviewees felt in the UK, continues on from the intimidation and physical torture that all interviewees described having experienced in their country of origin. Both pre- and postmigration, feature the same faceless, senseless and all-powerful authoritarian characters, embodying a pervasive and often male threat. Shelly describes a Home Office decision maker, *'it's a certain strange man ... you look up there and you can't see his face'*. This parallels the nameless soldiers who tortured her in her home country, identifiable only by their uniform, as well as the equally faceless mob, from whom Eve fled. *'They can beat anyone for no reasons, they would first kill you and started asking questions "what did she do?"' (Eve)*. John explicitly compares the treatment he has received from the UK Government to African dictatorships. *'They are saying in Africa for example, there is some dictator, they are killing people. This is to kill as well. It's the same thing... I can say that this system is killing people mentally... it's a torture'*.

**Lack of a safe space and isolation** At the heart of migration narratives was a long search for a safe place in which to connect with people, talk about trauma experienced, and rebuild one's identity. Interviewees wanted to benefit from the therapy and self-care of telling their narratives (Murray, 2010). However, they felt that the asylum process denied them this. On the personal narrative level, interviewees described a series of impersonal, temporary and isolated social environments where they did not feel entirely at ease. Consequently, they could not tell their story and begin to process their experiences. The cramped impersonal settings

which litter narratives are testament this. *'I don't want to talk to people about [my situation]... when you live like I do and you sleep in a room with 20 other people and you put the mattress next to the other person... it's not easy' (John)*. Such transient spaces permitted only waiting and surviving.

Other narrative settings were similarly impersonal. Charities, for example, transformed asylum seekers into things which needed to be fed and clothed, rather than humans needing social nourishment. *'[People at charities] call you useless. They know, they see you every day coming to places... You don't have respect' (John)*. The diasporic community also only provided limited comfort. *'I went to churches [from my community]... and you know had tea and that's it... there is no way I can confide in anyone' (Eve)*. Narratives suggest that the isolation and ostracization interviewees experienced in their home country may have shaped their interpretation of UK spaces, for example, affecting their trust in diasporic communities.

In the absence of healing spaces, interviewees often coped by forgetting, locking experiences and emotions away. *'So much is bubbled inside of me, I'm not bringing it out ... and it's bad for me' (Shelly)*. John recalls his struggle to reconnect with his family in his home country. *'I don't speak to my family much. It's too difficult emotionally'*. Interviewees often described traumatic events with calmness and detachment. Shelly describes her eerie dissociation from past trauma *'I think I had two personalities... I don't actually remember that real pain, you know... but I know these things happened to me'*. On a positional narrative level, this may be linked to an internalisation of Home Office demands for a legal assessment of the case; to provide evidence without emotion. It is also plausible that the focus on spaces of isolation on the

personal level is influenced by the positional dominance of the Home Office, which emphasises asylum seeker separation from society (e.g. Sales, 2002).

The readiness with which interviewees engaged in their interviews and the rapport they found with interviewers, suggests that the interview may have constituted a secure healing space for interviewees. *'[I've made friends] like you! I met you, I introduced myself'* (Shelly). Ice and Fire participants gave this context, describing how they were sympathetic and took what the interviewee said at face value, providing a direct contrast to the potentially re-traumatising Home Office interview. Thus, it is possible that, the interviews provided therapeutic benefits by creating a trusting environment in which interviewees can recount and reframe traumatic experiences.

**'That day was confused and everything they were asking me I was saying yes, yes, yes'**

Narratives brought out the theme of a confusing and contradictory asylum process, forming an important part of how interviewees understood, or failed to understand, their social environment. Interviewees described the overwhelming pace the process began at, giving little time to understand what was happening, secure a lawyer, or recover from trauma. Interviewees described answering incomprehensible questions often in a state of mental distress. *'That day was confused and everything they were asking me I was saying yes, yes, yes. Because I didn't understand.... I was scared as well.'* (John). This contrasted with the frustration of long waiting times after the substantive interview. Interviewee narratives set up a nascent asylum seeker protagonist, lacking resources to navigate an incomprehensible system, against

an unfeeling monolithic antagonist in the Home Office. Interviewees felt that the only way to successfully navigate the system was with money and contacts. John for instance, recounted how his solicitor wouldn't see him before his substantive interview because he had no money.

The positional narrative level is crucial in understanding what people emphasised as the injustices of their case, such as how their cases were dismissed on trivialities. This was a message intended for the theatre audience, attempting to help people empathise, communicating the people's frustration and highlighting the injustice of the situation. For example, Shelly recounts how *'[there were newspapers] with my name and my picture talking about me... [the adjudicator] said he didn't believe the article because there was a spelling mistake'*. There was a sense the everchanging Home Office requirements were impossible to satisfy. *'The Home Office lost all my papers. They sent me a letter 'Please could you forward us a copy'... [my solicitor] sent a copy to them... they said, 'everything you sent to us were copies, where is the originals?'... so, they refused me again'* (John).

### **'I have to relive the torture I've gone through'**

Interviewees felt the bureaucratic torture of the asylum process, coupled with a lack of a safe space, made it difficult to emotionally recover from previous trauma. *'You can't put it behind you if you have an interview and you have to speak about that'* (Shelly). Postmigration experiences were making it difficult for premigration experiences to be evaluated and digested. Thus, interviewees experienced a cycle of retraumatisation. In some instances, the Home Office placed people in situations similar to previous trauma. Eve described how she went through a traumatic separation with a loved one in her home country, only for the Home Office to separate them again once they were both in the UK.

A key retraumatising factor was the continual disbelief interviewees felt they encountered, when recounting traumatic events. People implied that, for premigration events to be processed, they must be accepted and validated in their postmigration retelling.. Home Office representatives were disbelieving even when it came to intimate personal attributes such as sexuality which may require incredible amounts of bravery to be public about *'no one can come up to you and tell you 'I am Gay, I am Lesbian' just like that, it takes a lot, especially from us, the blacks... [the Home Office] don't respect the fact'* (quote is not attributed to any interviewee to protect participant identity). In some instances, interviewees felt Home Office demands bordered on humiliation *'you have to go to bed with them, that's the only way to prove'* (quote is not attributed to any interviewee to protect participant identity).

The theme of retraumatisation demonstrates how the post-migration narrative is intrinsically woven in with pre-migration experiences. Interviewees were not able to reevaluate pre-migration experiences in a more constructive and healing way as a positive conclusion has not been reached in terms of post-migration experiences. Shelly immediately links regret of her past actions with a lack of refugee status. The level of regret she feels about past actions, and the extent to which she sees them as “mistakes”, appear to be linked to her status in the UK. *'We learn through our mistakes and we say – next time I will not do ABCD, but if we are not protected, that means we are still living in the mistake that we made'*. In narratives, interviewees described how the Home Office did not engage with the possibilities of retraumatisation or put adequate safeguards in place.

**'Every human being deserves the right to plan for the future'**



The lack of a safe space and difficulties with the asylum process meant that interviewees felt largely unable to control or plan for their future. On the personal narrative level, control was administered by institutions or figures of socio-political authority who set boundaries on the life paths permissible for interviewees. For instance, interviewees often talked about Home Office restrictions. *'With the Home Office you can't do anything... They have the power to decide'* (Shelly). *'You're not allowed to work and you're living on £36'* (Eve). Only a basic life of limbo was possible, limiting the ability to reclaim lost lives and build new ones. This lack of control featured both pre-and post-migration in narratives. *'They take your wife and they go and rape your wife and you are there and you can't do anything'* (John). Thus, though interviewees fled their country due a lack of control and, in doing so, exercised significant agency, in the UK they again felt powerless to affect substantial events in their lives. Though settings for pre-and post-migration narratives changed from a place of danger, lawlessness and community in countries of origin to an impersonal, aimless and threatening limbo in the UK, the feeling of a lack of control remained.

The inability to plan for a future was associated with a loss of identity. During the wait for application outcomes, narratives were filled with aimlessness. Interviewees described how they have nothing to do or work towards, and gradually felt like they became nothing. This was evident on the ideological narrative level. The shared stories people primarily drew on, were not those from societies in their countries of origin, but from the invisible and wandering community of asylum seekers. Narratives were enriched with shared asylum seeker stories of aimlessness where church, parks, libraries and charities form a routine of drudgery and the abstract setting is limbo *'I go [to church] because I don't have anywhere else to go. If I go to one, then another, maybe I can keep busy.'* (John). This lack of purpose was damaging to the

sense of self *'I become a very different person. Because when I have to leave [temporary accommodation] I don't know where to go or what to do'* (John).

The need to plan a future was accentuated and contrasted by the rapid and chaotic pre-migration events interviewee described. Within a day, sometimes hours, interviewees went from a stable life with routine, respect and comfort, to one where their life was under threat. Thus, pre-migration experiences shaped and focussed post-migration interpretations. Narratives reflected this in their unfinished nature and pervading anxiousness; interviewees were conscious that their life of limbo could uncontrollably pivot between death or safety at any time.

Yet, as a counterbalance, through each narrative, ran a story of continuing struggle and enduring determination. On the positional and ideological levels of analysis, this could be interpreted interviewees rejecting the framing of victim which can pervade mainstream images of refugees (Malkki, 1996). Though the situation felt uncontrollable, this didn't completely erase interviewees' sense of agency *'if I don't get up and say something, no-one will know. No-one will fight my war. I will have to fight it myself'* (Shelly). Moreover, there was hope that the next generation will be better off and freer from trauma. Shelly talks proudly about her daughter, who is beginning to mirror the care and compassion for people she had when she was young. *'I get these reports that she is the most loving child in the class. The most loving, caring, understanding'* (Shelly). Speaking to the audience (through the Ice and Fire interview) and attempting to change perceptions was one part of this fight. It also constituted an act of control in a context where planning for the future was not possible, helping maintain a sense of identity in an environment where it was being eroded.

### **'It makes you wonder whether they are considering us as human'**

All the above elements contributed to an overarching theme among interviewees that they have been dehumanised. On the interpersonal narrative level, this is the central message both interviewees and interviewers wished to communicate to the theatre audience. When receiving a lifechanging decision from the Home Office, Shelly commented that *'it makes you wonder whether they are considering us as human... I've seen programmes, the way they care for chimpanzees... we are not given that kind of love and affection'*. In all narratives, this experience of dehumanisation by the Home Office mirrored their descriptions of the most traumatic moments in their countries of origin *'while we were tortured in that prison, it's like we were cows, we were not humans'* (Shelly). Again, negative experiences postmigration were inseparable from those premigration.

On the ideological narrative level, the dehumanisation interviewees experienced was exacerbated by a perceived public narrative that asylum seekers did not need to flee and came here for social security benefits. The personal narrative level, where interviewees describe an social environment of loneliness and alienation, interacts with perceptions of the public narrative. An isolated environment may make the public narrative feel more extreme, while the public narrative may increase feelings of isolation. Shelly describes being alone, homeless and penniless when she went to the hospital to give birth. *'There is nothing harder than going to hospital and pushing a kid when you don't have anyone... I was [at the hospital] by myself... and I was holding [my child] and cried and I'm like "oh my God, it's like I don't have a mother'*. She then describes the reaction of the hospital nurse, linking her alienation with her perceptions of the public narrative around refugees. *'[The nurse] said "Why did you call an*

*ambulance? There are people that need it more than you. You should have taken a bus”... She had just told me like I wasn’t worthy.* Accordingly, interviewer and interviewee actively collaborated to counter the perceived public narrative. For example, interviewees contrasted their current limbo with the comfort and fulfilling routine in their countries before they were forced leave. These descriptions were aided by interviewer questions about their background.

Interviewees felt that public and Government expectations belonged to the realms of doublethink, transforming them to subhuman or superhuman at the UK Government’s convenience. They were, on the one hand, treated as lazy and dishonest, out to con the state. At the same time, they were expected to uphold the highest standards of honesty and integrity in keeping up with the oft-nonsensical Home Office bureaucracy. Shelly describes being late to sign in at a Home Office reporting centre *‘they were telling me, “next time you do something like that you will be reporting weekly”.* And they think we can’t forget these things. We are *superhumans’.*

The focus on the co-production of narratives countering mainstream narratives highlights the importance of public perception and media representations for the well-being of people seeking asylum, a point also raised in the interviews with Ice and Fire staff. Though this served a partly political purpose, it was also a way to maintain dignity in the face of host society prejudice and to justify the suffering endured around migration. Perhaps to avoid a sense of guilt and regret about leaving loved ones, narratives concluded very strongly that the migration and related sacrifices were necessary. In this example, the personal level of analysis is also vital.

**‘They see it on the TV, internet, news... but they don’t change their policy’**

On the interpersonal narrative level, the theme of dehumanisation led to a call for the audience to act. Interviewees achieved this, first, through the ideological narrative level, establishing that their stories are common among people seeking asylum. In the premigration element of their narratives, people draw on societal stories of persecution, where the outcomes are clear and pre-defined by tradition *'if your kid was found to be a homosexual. One; they would send you packing definitely... And then your parents your family is banished'* (quote is not attributed to any interviewee to protect participant identity). Interviewees evoked the image of others who are suffering in their country by emphasising their fortune in fleeing. *'I was lucky that my visa was still valid, so I could still [leave]'* (Eve). When John describes his life in the UK, his use of 'we' and 'us' suggests his story is partly drawn from a community of asylum seekers. *'That's why we are staying with charities... it's very hard for us'* (John). These examples serve to remind the audience that, although each experience is highly personalised, they fit into a wider narrative about migrants' rights and that this trauma may be collectively experienced.

Interviewees tried to prompt people into action by contrasting the UK with their countries of origin and Africa, engaging in an imagined dialogue with the theatre audience. Countries of origin are painted as dangerous places with intractable political problems, everyday violence and where no one is safe *'They kill them. Every day, they kill them... if the government wants to kill somebody, they don't hide it'* (John). The everydayness of violence is evident in John's use of the word 'kill' 58 times in his interview. Africa is referred to in a stereotypical manner as a place of corruption, wars, patriarchy and intolerance *'bribing them with campaigning materials... that's what happens in Africa, it's not like here!'* (Shelly). These contrasts build the expectation of the UK as a forward-thinking county with an efficient system and the capacity to provide safety. Narratives then detail how these expectations were fundamentally not met,

for instance in the contradictory nature of the asylum process. Thus, interviewees argued that the UK Government has not met its basic obligations and urge the audience to keep the Government accountable.

Analysis of narratives on the interpersonal level demonstrates how the call to action is built in collaboration with the interviewer who asks interviewees for their message to the theatre audience *'If you had an opportunity to stand up in front of thousands of British people and tell them something, what would it be?'* (Shelly's interviewer). Interviewees oblige in giving a neat summation of their demands *'Anyone under this sun, colour, religion, politics, anything, deserves a second chance. And they should give us that'* (Shelly). As well as a final message, interviewers invite interviewees to reflect on more hopeful things towards the end of the interview. This includes eliciting positive examples of British people helping in order to give the audience practical ideas of they can help. This is an example of the ideological and interpersonal levels narratives interacting; interviewer questions facilitating the interviewee to counter of public narratives on the ideological level

#### **4. Discussion**

We explored how people seeking asylum made sense of their asylum experience and how influenced mental health and well-being. We did so by analysing the migration narratives of three people interviewed by Ice and Fire, a theatre company working with people who have sought asylum. We supplemented this with two interviews with Ice and Fire staff. Seven key themes around mental health and well-being were identified with the overarching theme of dehumanisation. Interviewees felt they were reduced to subhuman beings defined by their

lack of papers, Government actions and public narratives. In the process, interviewees lost their sense of self.

Narrative and thematic analysis strongly suggests participants felt they existed in a social threatening and confusing social environment, dominated by authoritarian voices. This was linked to reduced psychological and emotional wellbeing. Our findings build on the extant literature. For example, Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2007) worked with Latino immigrants in the USA, finding that those who felt threatened and hunted by immigration authorities were more likely to experience negative emotional states such as anger. These negative emotions were linked with more stress related to employment and finances, though the direction of causality is unclear. Our work suggests that feeling threatened partly leads to negative mental health consequences through a cycle of retraumatisation. Not only do negative experiences with immigration bureaucracy frustrate and distress people, but it reminds them of difficult premigration experiences and inhibits their ability to accept their past. This is supported by Schock et al.'s (2015) study looking at the number of posttraumatic intrusions (related to events experienced in their country of origin) before and after an asylum interview. They find a significant increase in posttraumatic intrusions post-interview in comparison to a control group of people who hadn't yet been invited to interview.

Our work suggests that an isolating and confusing social environment may stunt growth as a person and prevent the construction of a meaningful life. There has been some work on how confidence in one's future direction in life affects well-being and mental health. Drawing on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) work on event uncertainty, Ryan et al. (2008) argue that the prolonged insecurity and unknowing which can be experienced during the asylum process is a

major source of stress. Werkuyten and Nekuee (1998) worked with Iranian refugees in the Netherlands. They found that the feeling of mastery, 'the extent to which people feel to be in control of important circumstances in their lives', mediated the relationship between discrimination and reduced social wellbeing. Discrimination, the authors argue, limits the choices people have for 'efficacious activity' and hence the feeling of being in control. Our research concurs with this work, also finding that a lack of control is related to a perceived discriminatory system.

Narratives suggest that it is the lack of the future element of control which is key; planning decisions and opportunities, or lack thereof, may be particularly damaging to people's mental health and wellbeing. This is supported by other qualitative work such as Chase (2013). In her qualitative interviews unaccompanied young asylum seekers living in the UK, Chase found that being unable to visualise a future was associated with 'feelings of having fundamentally no importance in the world'. Our study adds to this association; our participants felt that envisaging a future is fundamental to feeling human and a sense of self. The feeling of dehumanisation presents a particularly strong obstacle to growth as a person.

While living in an oppressive environment, interviewees still maintained a strong voice in narratives emphasising their agency and rejecting their framing as victims as well as negative public and government discourse. These discourses are well-established in the literature, with studies demonstrating how Western media portrays people seeking asylum as bogus, infectious, terrorist harbouring, illegal invaders (e.g. Parker, 2015; Esses and Medianu, 2013; Gabrielatos and Baker, 2008) or, at best, an unhuman and de-historicised swarm of generic



bodies (Malkki 1996). Our findings agree with the focus on dehumanisation, suggesting that the dehumanising rhetoric may have a dehumanising impact on people.

The therapeutic part of the narrative may be crucial in asylum seeker transcripts which describe extremely traumatic migration experiences involving rape, torture and the death of family members. By creating a trusting environment in which to recount traumatic experiences, the interviews may have served a therapeutic function. This becomes more apparent if we view the retelling of migration experiences as a form of activism; the narratives were, in part, a political expression of a collective plight and desire to change the system. This also fits the campaigning nature of *Ice and Fire* and the work interviewers conducted to facilitate a political message. Research on activism and mental health in the positive psychology literature suggests that there may be positive mental health benefits. For example, Baker (2007) found qualitative evidence that equal rights activism in the LGBT community may help reduce feelings of depression and anxiety. Similarly, Klar and Kasser (2009) reported a link between student activist behaviour and vitality.

Our study also examined the temporal link between pre- and postmigration elements of the narrative. The testimonies of interviewees concurred with psychological research arguing that in order to treat trauma, therapists must offer a safe environment in which to reinterpret their past (e.g. Rothbaum, 2008). Accordingly, the postmigration environment is crucial to recovering from premigration trauma. Interviewees not only stated this explicitly, but also implicitly in their narratives. Narratives in pre- and postmigration, though belonging two very different settings, made use of similar characters. The experiences in both parts of the narrative were intertwined.

This study advances our understanding of the migration experiences of people seeking asylum. One strength is the use of narratives, which are well suited to understanding migration experiences. Eastmond (2007) argues that they help us understand experiences in populations we have limited access to, appreciate how people make sense of change, and recognise the individuality within migration stories. Our study makes use of these advantages while also bringing together the commonalities in migration experiences using thematic analysis. Our analysis of narrative co-production with the interviewer is another strength, as the interviewer's role is often ignored in studies. For instance, though Sandhu et al. (2015) discuss the co-construction of narratives, it is limited to co-construction within refugee social groups. There is little reflection on how the authors were co-producing new narratives of migration with refugees in their interviews.

As narratives were collected from a campaigning organisation, they are likely to be very to be selected partly because they are unfavourable to the Home Office. Correspondingly, they may exaggerate or emphasise negative events. However, the aim of this study was not to provide a balanced view of the Home Office, but to understand people's migration experience and how it might influence mental health. Additionally, using Ice and Fire interviews brings a potential strength in the new knowledge data from an unusual source may deliver.

A key limitation of this study is that it used only three asylum seeker transcripts and two interviews with Ice and Fire staff. Though as qualitative research this study does not aim to arrive at universal themes, the low number limits the range of experiences and backgrounds we could consider in the analyses. In particular, it would have been useful to understand the

experiences of more nationalities. However, the simultaneous method of thematic and narrative analysis provides exceptionally rich data, allowing for in-depth analysis of migration experiences. Narrative analysis alone provides plentiful data, with studies such as Sandhu et al. (2015) reporting novel findings with comparable participant numbers.

## **5. Conclusion**

Interviewees described how policies related to the asylum process negatively affected their health and well-being. This included the seemingly arbitrary Home Office decision making process, surveillance, a lack of material support, and the inability to work. These policies prevented interviewees from moving on from past traumas, instead creating new ones. Ultimately, the process left people feeling dehumanised and they began to lose their sense of identity. Their traumatic narratives continued between the premigration and postmigration elements of their story. The UK was not a setting of safety, but a place of continued danger. In this context, there is a strong need for a place of safety to recover from traumas and reframe premigration experiences. NGOs can work in a mutually collaborative way with people seeking asylum to create spaces where people can purposively fashion their narratives of migration and reframe traumatic experiences.

The themes identified in this study describe how postmigration factors, particularly the asylum process, might affect mental health. These could be further explored in future research and used by migrants' rights groups to build their evidence base. The method of simultaneously narrative and thematic analysis was useful and could be repeated in future studies on forced migration and more widely. Future work could also use the differences between the asylum process in different countries investigate the impact of particular factors on mental health.

With sufficient time and resources, a longitudinal study following people through the asylum process would be extremely useful in understanding factors affecting mental health.

Our results suggest that people seeking asylum are not only aware of public discourses around migration, but may be eager to combat them. Thus, we can add to Esses and Medianu's (2013) suggestion that to counter negative perceptions, government must proactively promote positive information on immigrant contributions. We would suggest that it is vital that space is made in media and public spaces for people who have sought asylum to voice their opinions and argue their case.

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