

The Challenges Faced During Home Office Interview when Seeking Asylum in the United Kingdom: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

¹Accounts by those seeking asylum are often challenged by the Home Office (HO) because of apparent inconsistencies and lack of credibility. Yet the ability to disclose everything at initial interview can be impacted by many factors. This study explores how applicants experienced interviews with the HO and its affects. Semi-Structured interviews were conducted with eight participants who had been through the UK asylum process. Transcripts of interviews were analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Four Superordinate themes were identified; “*Confronted by a Hostile System*”, “*Intra and Interpersonal Barriers at Interview*”, “*Moments of Reprieve*”, “*A Destructive Process*”. Participants identified experiences of a system that felt overtly and intentionally hostile. Psychological, practical, and institutional factors were identified as affecting what they were able to disclose. Participants identified deterioration to their mental health because of the experience, which for some was not alleviated once leave to remain was granted.

Keywords

asylum; refugees; asylum interview; forced migration; interpretative phenomenological analysis; IPA

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Introduction

UK guidance (UKBA, 2021) requires people seeking asylum in the UK to provide an account of their experiences during the substantive interview with the HO. To be granted leave to remain, their personal history must be described such that their fear of persecution can be accepted as genuine. Disclosure of traumatic, terrifying, and often shameful experiences is expected of refugees during the substantive interview. This interview is considered by the HO as the ‘main opportunity for the claimant to provide evidence about why they need international protection’ (UKBA, 2021, p. 6). Despite policy guidance that acknowledges the difficulties that refugees may face when describing their experiences (UKBA, 2021), the HO asylum process appears predicated on the assumption that a coherent and consistent disclosure of all the relevant reasons for seeking asylum is possible for all applicants at the initial substantive interview (UKBA, 2021).

Mayblin (2019) has argued that the broader principles that underpin the treatment of those who seek asylum in the UK are preoccupied with keeping ‘bogus’ applicants from pursuing asylum for economic purposes, which has resulted in the everyday treatment of refugees by the state as a form of slow violence (Mayblin, Wake, & Kazemi, 2020). This is a “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight; a delayed destruction often dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Those who seek refugee status are frequently left waiting for extensive periods while their case is processed. Recent assessment of the data has put the average wait between application and decision at 473 days (Neal, 2020). During this time applicants are usually unable to work, study, or secure family reunion and many, reliant on government provided asylum support, live below the poverty line with reported detrimental impacts to their physical and mental health (Mayblin, 2019).

This systemic suspicion of those who come to the UK seeking asylum, is argued to have resulted in a ‘culture of disbelief’ endemic to the HO asylum decision making process (Bohmer & Shuman, 2018). Whether asylum is claimed at ports of entry or later in a refugee’s journey, cynicism about the legitimacy of a refugee’s claim is believed to be widespread in those who would process it (Jubany, 2017). Those interviewing applicants are said to position themselves to be suspicious of the refugee’s narrative, looking for falsehoods in what is said, despite research showing that most professional ‘lie catchers’ are no better than the average person at detecting lies (Hartwig, Granhag, Strömwall, & Vrij, 2005). Yet

the complexity of language (Spotti, 2018) as well as cultural differences in narrative conventions (Blommaert, 2009) may prevent a refugee from meeting these expectations (Bohmer & Shuman, 2018).

To convince interviewers of the veracity of their claim, those who seek asylum in the UK are expected to present their experiences in a way that meets the UK cultural conventions of narrative (Herlihy & Turner, 2015), satisfying the assumptions made by decision makers about what ‘credible’ looks and sounds like (Bohmer & Shuman, 2018). They may be expected to meet the decision maker’s cultural conception of “refugeeness” (Nyers, 2006), required to enact allocated characteristics on the part of the decision maker of passivity and victimhood to demonstrate their deservingness of refugee status. Those who do not may be judged in a negative light. Criticisms of this concept of refugeeness have argued that this conceals the possibilities of political dynamism and agency, reducing the heuristic of what a refugee is to a single, passive, voiceless identity (Walters, 2008). Yet this concealment appears required of refugees to be seen as credible.

Additionally, there are complex psychological factors, which may impact how a person chooses or is able to explain their reasons for seeking asylum (Abbas, von Werthern, Katona, Brady, & Woo, 2021)

PTSD is reported at high levels in the refugee (Fazel, Wheeler, & Danesh, 2005), and is particularly prevalent in those who have experienced sexual trauma (Baillot, Cowan, & Munro, 2012). Rape is used as a tool of war (Hagen & Yohani, 2010) because it shames the person who is raped and shame is known to make people want to conceal the shameful event (Lee, Scragg, & Turner, 2001). Compounding this, those who have experienced interpersonal trauma, often find it particularly hard to believe that they will be treated fairly (Brand, Schielke, Brams, & DiComo, 2017). Dissociation, which frequently occurs in the aftermath of severe trauma, is understood as a psychological defence mechanism, manifested as perceived detachment of the mind from the emotional state and the body. Dissociation is thought to impede the integration of trauma memory (Brand et al., 2017), and impacts what is said. During interview with the HO a question may be asked, resulting in traumatic recall and subsequent dissociation. This may appear to an uninitiated interviewer as vague narrative or a complete evasion of the question. Yet research with refugees (Bögner, Brewin, & Herlihy, 2010) and professionals who work with them (Abbas

et al., 2021) has reported they frequently struggle to disclose personal details due to feeling too traumatised, too ashamed, or too afraid to talk about the past.

Current UKBA Guidance states that should an interviewee be unable to disclose at interview an interviewer “can consider asking them to prepare a statement on the issue to be submitted at the earliest opportunity” (UKBA, 2021, p. 43). Yet recent assessment of Asylum casework by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) identified that while there was evidence of some good practice, caseworkers (referred to as decision makers in the report) were still found to be insufficiently ‘probing’ in substantive interviews, used confrontational or insensitive questioning, were openly sceptical of claimants in interviews and did not respond appropriately to sensitive disclosures of personal information, (Neal, 2020). Caseworkers reported that senior managers appeared to value quantity over quality of substantive interviews and subsequent decisions (Neal, 2020). This pressure increases the likelihood of heuristics being used in decision making, which in turn increases the chance that decisions are made based on faulty biases and assumptions (Vrij, 2000). Research in the UK has indicated that in judging the credibility of a claim, assumptions about language formulation and narration style (Ramezankhah, 2017), acceptable or appropriate expression of emotion (Jubany, 2011), and ‘reasonable behaviour’ when fleeing a situation (Schuster, 2020) are often based on the norms and values of someone living in Britain rather than in the country from which the refugee is fleeing.

Bohmer and Shuman (2018) describe these practices as ‘failures of logic’, whereby the decision to deny an application is based on the logical assumptions of the decision-maker; situated in Western norms and the limits of their own experience. If the person listening to the narrative, whether a caseworker or a judge, cannot imagine the experiences being described, or believes that most refugees are mendacious, these assumptions are likely to adversely affect their decision-making process. Conversely, a person claiming refugee status on false grounds may nonetheless be granted status if they match the decision maker’s heuristic of ‘refugeeness’ (Herlihy & Turner, 2015).

Although there is a body of research about the asylum process, and the factors which may influence the success or failure of a claim, much of this comes from the perspective of those working with refugees. Research with refugees in the UK, concerning the experience of HO interviews, and the challenges experienced by them when interviewed by the HO has been more limited. The aim of this study is to use IPA to further build on the literature by

exploring the experience of HO interviews and the challenges faced by refugees when explaining their reasons for seeking asylum in the UK. IPA's epistemological stance assumes that access to a participant's cognitive world is possible through the analytic process, but that this will have an interpretive element to it (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). It has been argued that IPA is particularly appropriate for research with refugees (Schweitzer & Steel, 2008), with some stating that researchers frequently present refugees as a "mute and faceless physical mass" (Rajaram, 2002, p. 247). The idiographic process of analysis in IPA allows for "detailed, nuanced analysis of *particular* instances of lived experience" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 37) making space for similarity and difference in a person's experience of a phenomena to be attended to. Additionally, the method of analysis in IPA sets theoretical assumptions aside allows for the participants' knowledge and experiences to be privileged outside that of the researcher (Schweitzer & Steel, 2008). The aim is that what is important to the participants come to the fore, without undue imposition of a tightly controlled agenda which could be experienced as a repetition of the HO interview experience.

Method

The study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee at University College London. Participants were recruited by referral through the Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF). Participants could be included in the study if: they were able to conduct the interview in English; had been granted permission to stay; the clinicians working with them had no serious concerns that talking about their experiences of the UK asylum process would lead to undue distress. Recruitment used purposive sampling. Research using IPA chooses participants who are considered homogenous; defined here as meaning that they were all refugees in the UK who had successfully gone through the asylum process in the UK.

Participants were excluded from the study if they were still going through the asylum process, would need an interpreter to participate in the research, or were likely to be unduly affected by talking about their experiences. Eight participants took part in the study. Due to the detailed nature of IPA small sample sizes are considered appropriate (Smith et al., 2009).

The process of gaining informed consent was discussed in a Service User meeting at HBF the charity from where research participants were to be invited. Due the sensitivity of the research focus, it was agreed that participants would not be asked to provide identifying details. Oral consent was preferred as it obviated paperwork connecting people's names to the

project, and thus only oral consent was used with participants who took part. Furthermore, no data was gathered on gender, place of origin, or any other personal characteristics of the participants. It was hoped that this would increase the likelihood of participants feeling sufficiently safe to speak freely about their HO interview experiences.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. To avoid further traumatization, participants were not asked questions about, or expected to disclose, their reasons for seeking asylum in the UK. However, if they wished to speak about this they were not prevented. The focus of the research was on experiences of seeking asylum in the UK, particularly that of the UK HO interview process. The interviews, which were audio recorded, lasted between 45 and 120 minutes; most being around 60 minutes long.

Analysis

Analysis followed guidelines set out in Smith et al., (2009). Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher, with any identifying information obscured in the transcription. The following transcription notations were used:

Editorial elision of unnecessary material	[...]
Anonymised information	[Country Name]
Explanatory/Clarifying comments	(Home Office Interview)

Each transcription was analysed separately so that the idiographic content could be attended to. [Table 1](#) is the final master table of themes representing the shared higher order qualities of the interview.

Table 1

Master Table for all participants

Superordinate Theme	Sub Themes
Confronted by a Hostile System	Invariable Rejection
	Systemic Ignorance
	In a War
Intra and Interpersonal Barriers at Interview	(Unacknowledged) Psychological Barriers to Disclosure
	Tyrannical Interviewers
Moments of Reprieve	Invaluable Support
	Feeling Safe and Heard
	Better in the End
A Destructive Process	Negative Psychological Consequences During the Process
	Ongoing Negative Psychological Consequences

Results

1. Confronted by a Hostile System

This first superordinate theme describes the participants perception of the HO system. There was a sense that the system itself was constructed to prioritise rejection. As this was seen as the primary purpose, those within the system were deemed as not understanding the circumstances which applicants endure prior to seeking asylum, nor in some cases understand the refugee convention itself. This left participants feeling as though they must battle to have any chance of their right to asylum being acknowledged or accepted.

Invariable Rejection

All but one participant spoke of a sense that the HO asylum process was constructed in such a way as be trying to find reasons for rejecting an application. Participant 9 stated:

they don't want people in this country..... they just think ah maybe you just want to be there. Who wants to be there? I cannot leave my family to be here [...] I don't know the language, and I don't understand anything.

There appear to be a few themes in this reflection. First is the general perception that the HO does not want people here, the implication being that interactions are then structured in a way which makes that outcome more possible. They are then trying to make sense of the belief structures of the HO that underpin this; refugees desire to be in the UK and coming here is an active and preferred choice. Participant 9 articulates how ridiculous they believe this presumption is: they have left their family and at the time did not know the language.

Participant 2 presents the rejection experience in a different way:

whatever you tell HO they turn you down, whatever, whatever, they turn you down, all they know is turning down.

Here there is a sense that there is nothing that can be said that is good enough for leave to remain to be granted. The repetition conveys an image of a non-discriminating conveyor belt. No matter what information is given, what experiences are relayed, and whatever is said, the answer will not change. The use of “all they know” could imply a belief that this is that this is an inbuilt HO culture.

Systemic Ignorance

Not only is the HO seen as constructed to be motivated to reject applicants, but there was also a perception there was a systemic, and possibly wilful, ignorance of the circumstances that a person has lived through prior to seeking asylum in the UK. Participants described grappling with gaps in knowledge within the UK asylum system. Participant 7 states:

Home Office, the people who they put on the cases, what they know, is different to how we live.

This short statement is one that is echoed by other participants in their interviews and speaks to the ownership of knowledge. Participant 7 is not saying that the caseworkers do not know anything. Their point is that what they “know” is not what is *actually happening*. The knowledge the HO possesses, and the lived experience of refugees are not one and the same. This differential is echoed by participant 9

they say “the news say it's five people and you say it's hundred” (raising voice) that is politics, so why you asking? That is the news saying. I'm telling you what I've seen, [...]. If they say “the news say they killed five people” I've seen more than five people! So why do you want me to believe five?

This interaction exemplifies the pain and frustration of having one's reality denied. Their point is that news does not equate to truth. News is politics, inferring that what is seen on the news serves a political purpose and that presentation is not congruent with their experience. Are they supposed to believe the story that has been presented to the world over what they have experienced? This interaction illustrates how who holds the power often gets to have ownership over what is considered ‘the truth’.

This perceived ignorance within the culture of the HO extends further than not understanding the realities of what is happening in the participants country of origin. Participant 4 posits that the HO does not understand the refugee convention itself.

they think Asylum is, you run away from your country, and running from war or you have to be a trafficking victim. It's not asylum, asylum is far bigger than that. [...] they just seem to think, you left your country, came here because you want a better life. Excuse me! Some people are billionaires in their own country, [...] I would love my previous life, because I had the most beautiful life. Why would I want this sort of shitty life?

In this extract Participant 4 speculates that the preconceived notions of who a refugee can be are influenced by an assumption on the part of the HO that a claimant is only here for a better life. Therefore, to those working in the system it is inconceivable that a refugee's previous life was superior. There is an implication in this statement of the colonial view that the global South as undeveloped and poor. This particular construction of the global South is theorized to impede caseworkers from comprehending that someone seeking asylum may not have come from poverty in search of a "better life".

In a War

The subtheme "In a War" reflects the experience described by participants that to get through these systemic barriers you had to battle against the HO to survive the process. Interviewees presented this in different ways, some saw this as a challenge that they must rise to, whereas others appeared passive, resigned to the lack of power (in many ways correctly) they perceived themselves as having.

Describing the experiences of the detention centre, participant 2, states:

they come to deport people it will be as though they are going to war. You will see those giant guys, [...], just to come and pack a woman.

In this description it seems that the guards are perceived as soldiers who see themselves as going to war. Their role is to accompany the women on the coach to the airport prior to deportation, but their demeanour is reminiscent of something much more domineering. The use of the word "pack", something that you might do with luggage, infers a sense of feeling dehumanised which permeated so many of the participants' interviews. Different to the others in this theme, this participant describes a passive role, a prisoner in the fight and not an active participant.

In contrast, participant 10 states:

It was a horrible experience; it was a battlefront.

The use of the metaphor "battlefront" as opposed to "battle" creates a sense of action, this is where the struggle is; to exert their human rights, to communicate to others what is going on, and to be understood by the person interviewing them. Participant 4 develops the imagery of the fight further:

(HO Caseworkers) I think they don't know, that is why they are doing this. Otherwise no one can do these kind of things [...] become unaware of your problems [...]denying that you are telling the truth[...], first thing you feel is like so helpless, like, there is no way you can do anything and then you leave everything and you feel like I'm going to fight, I'm going to do this [...] then it makes you angry, upset, aggressive and then frustrated. You know I'm fighting so much and I'm doing all those things, but you know they don't understand.

Here the fight is presented differently, they make sense of the caseworkers' actions by stating that they do not know the rights of refugees, linking back to the systemic ignorance previously described. For them, the HO's lack of awareness is the only way they can comprehend the actions and decisions encountered. Yet there is something in the statement which speaks to an attempt to convince themselves of this in the use of the phrase "become unaware". There is an implication that they think that at some point the caseworkers may have been perfectly capable of understanding what they are trying to explain. There appear to be two different fights being described: the fight to leave the situation which has made them a refugee, and then the fight with the HO to be recognised as one. This carries a sense of endless fighting, and the tireless work to make their story heard by a system that is perceived unmotivated to understand.

2. Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Barriers at Interview

The cultural barriers at the macro level of the HO system appear to impact how the interviews themselves are conducted. The intrapersonal barriers of fear, shame, and trauma interact with the interpersonal barrier of what are experienced as tyrannical interviewers, who are seen by the participants as striving to ignore or obscure the core of the interviewees experience.

(Unacknowledged) Psychological Barriers to full disclosure

Participant 2 discusses their first substantive interview:

I don't know the situation I am in when I did the interview, because I've been facing many problems by then.

This statement illuminates two issues which are pertinent to the experiences of those seeking asylum. First, the lack of knowledge about the basis on which they could make their claim. At this point they have no external support; the comment that they do not know where they're going refers, not to the physical building, but to the significance of the interview. They do not

really understand the process or the circumstances under which they can claim asylum, they simply say what they think is relevant. The second issue is the drive to obscure shameful experiences with generic language. The “problems” faced are multiple interpersonal traumas, both in the country in which they were born, and once again when in England. Even now, they are reluctant to describe in plain language what these problems are.

Participant 3 also discusses the role of shame, and the struggle to overcome the desire to remain silent about experiences they perceive as shameful:

I feel so bad about it when I was explaining to them, because it was so difficult, so difficult for me to open my mouth to tell them in that first interview. Everything I was saying, it makes me feel ashamed of myself.

The effect portrayed here is as if muted, and they are struggling to open their mouth. Then, when this is managed, how awful they feel. So even participant 3, who overall had the most positive relationship with the UK asylum process by perceiving it as a subsequent liberation, still portrays the interview as evoking unbearable emotions. Explaining how they feared death if all was disclosed, they initially only described part of their experiences. The omission of information was then used as grounds for refusal:

the therapist wrote again to them after the refusal. A situation where somebody has been under control for many years, it takes a while for everything to come out, at the same time. [...] I didn't lie to you. I said the truth, I didn't say it before, because I was under oath, I was under oath, I was afraid.

This extract shows the division between the perception of this omission by the HO and by the participant. The participant states that what was said was not a lie, that their ability to disclose the full story was distorted by fear that they might die or be hurt if they broke the oath they had made. The difficulties experienced in speaking openly are expanded by Participant 6:

My emotions even spoke for me, because I couldn't even talk, broke down, from the moment I started [...] I got it out more when I had counselling and therapy.

Initially unable to articulate what they had gone through, the description of trying to express experiences verbally as “getting it out” suggests something which is stuck inside them and hard to access. Through therapy they can transform emotions into words, but as in the

experiences of other participants, to describe everything in the first interview felt impossible. Time and support to articulate the experience are identified as necessary.

Tyrannical Interviewers

These intrapersonal barriers to disclosure appear to participants to be unacknowledged, unobserved, or unknown by HO interviewers. HO Interviewers are viewed, for the most part, as not motivated to understand what is being explained. They are seen as intentionally domineering, at times abusing their power to create an outcome that serves the needs of the HO system with little consideration for those who must endure it, as participant 9 states:

The feeling I had right from the onset and is still the feeling I have now and then. I would say they are super wicked.

Participant 10 describes the experience of being interviewed as one where they believe the HO interviewer is calculatedly trying to manipulate what is said:

there are things you've said before, but they will try to put words into your mouth, in order for them to use against you. If you are not strong and you are not accurate enough, you will end up saying what you are not even meant to be saying.

The HO interviewer is seen as intentionally trying to manipulate a mistake that, “*they can use against you*”. The description presents the perception of a very adversarial interview, which is trying to catch or perhaps create a “lie”. Use of the word “strong” to describe the qualities perceived as needed to withstand these strategies link back to the earlier theme of “In a War”. What is described is not an attempt to elicit a true story, but a process that appears to be working to confirm the pre-conceived notion that this applicant is “bogus”. This experience of feeling that the parts of their story which demonstrate their right to asylum are being manipulated in some way is echoed by Participant 4:

the tone they use of their voice, it's like it changes she say “go slow”, but you are emotional and you don't wanna go slow and (she says) “I'm gonna stop the interview” it's like (claps), she have this power, you know and it makes you think, and it stops you to tell the very important points, [...] why you were telling that story.

Once again, the experience described is one where it is believed that that the HO interviewer is negatively affecting the interviewee’s narrative. In this instance the interviewer’s influencing behaviour is much more subtle: a different tone of voice, and a warning that the

interview will be terminated if the participant's presentation of their experience does not conform to what is needed. The outcome, in the view of Participant 4, is that an important part of the story they are struggling to say is silenced. Additionally the questions which are asked experiences as designed to dehumanise, and demonstrate that interviewee is 'less than' the HO interviewer. As they later state:

they want to ask those stupid questions, which makes you feel bad, which makes you feel stupid, which makes you feel like a slave.

In the participant's view the questions asked by the HO interviewer are intentionally used to emphasise the power differential between interviewer and interviewee. There is a cruel quality to the experience described. Use of the word 'slave' is particularly significant; it implies that they see themselves viewed as person whose life carries less value in the eyes of the HO.

The extract below summarises interplay between hostile culture of the HO and the perceived behaviours of those who carry out the substantive interviews.

They themselves, they are in the system, but they also try to make it tougher. I could liken it to their staff being given a rod, they can use the rod any way they want to use it, and they can use the rod to smack anybody, [...] to destroy things

The participant acknowledges that the caseworkers are acting in accordance with the "rule of the country", to gain asylum your reasons must be presented and accepted. The rod is a metaphor for the decision-making power that this participant sees the HO as having. Those who carry out this role are destructive and cruel because they can be, but the "rod" does not necessitate this, it is seen as a choice to act this way.

In this theme both the intra and interpersonal barriers that participants experienced in HO interview are illustrated. Fear, shame, and trauma impede what can coherently explained and this is met with interviewers who are seen as wilfully ignorant to this. HO interviewers are viewed by most participants as intentionally cruel and dehumanising, upholding a system that is purported to exist to help refugees but, in their experience, behaves in an opposite way.

3. Moments of Reprieve

Whilst most of what was described by the participants was of a rejecting, destructive experience. All participants described moments and people who worked to understand the

interviewees reasons for seeking asylum, listen to them ‘properly’ and support them through the substantive interview process so they were heard and understood.

Invaluable Supporters

Many of the participants described the invaluable role of some of the professionals who supported them, without whom success, and in many cases survival, would have been impossible. Participant 6 describes the work of their solicitor:

He just put in more and more and more evidence, he was doing research he worked tirelessly...

The amount of work on the part of the solicitor is emphasised here in the description of ‘more and more evidence’ and ‘tirelessly’.

The importance of support extends further than presenting the claim itself. For most participants, the process from initial application to being granted leave to remain lasted many years. The value of charities and other professionals working with them as protecting from further deterioration of mental health and helping to maintain hope was identified by a number of those interviewed. Participant 2 discusses the importance of the support received from a charity:

This charity does not let me be insane, I would have been insane by now if not for them coming into my life.

Without the active support provided by the charity, their view is that their mental health would have been severely compromised. Participant 8 articulates how without support from others they would not have been able to maintain hope. In his case this is not only hope of success but enough hope to live:

If I didn't find this [charity] I will give up. I don't have any hope. Why I have something like, because these people, the way they talk you, the way they chat with you and they will give you hope, a lot of hope. Even if you cry, they will cry with you, [...] [charity] are my real family in this country.

Here the importance of empathy is highlighted in the statement “if you cry, they will cry with you”, perhaps highlighting something that is perceived to be missing in the interactions with HO workers.

Feeling Safe and Heard

Most participants reported that there were circumstances in which they felt more able to speak and the challenges discussed above were less difficult to overcome. For several participants, the ability to disclose is strongly affected by a sense of safety as participant 9 describes:

it was different when I went to court, [...] everyone was [gender] and I was able to express myself, to be more comfortable.

Here it is the gender of the interviewer that is important; despite requests for an interviewer of the same gender, the participant was interviewed by someone of the opposite gender which had inhibited what they felt able to discuss. Being heard by a group that was of the same gender to them created a sense of comfort and safety and affected what could be described.

Participant 8 illuminates the value of feeling listened to:

When you go to judge they will hear properly everything, like your story from the bottom.

In this instance the right environment is not only what can be said, but also what is heard. The emphasis on “hear properly” implies that this has not been the experience up until this moment.

Better in the End

The experiences of HO interview and aftereffects of going through the process were perceived by all but Participant 2 as negative. Although some articulated that now that they were through it, there had been some positive psychological impact. Participant 6 spoke of feeling “*more determined than before*” to make the best life for themselves. Participant 4 spoke about being “*even stronger*” because of the process. For participant 4 there was an ambivalence in their tone, bringing doubt to how much this was believed. Throughout the interview they described themselves as a strong person. It may have been that to acknowledge that they are anything but strong may be too ego dystonic to bear. Contrary to all others, Participant 2 conceptualises the experience overall as having a positive psychological outcome.

talking to the Home Office, I am no longer afraid of them. Open up all that I have gone through, I have been able to voice out my situation, [...] it makes me feel very happy.

So, I am no longer that kind of shameless person anymore, in the midst of the Home Office, in the midst of, except my friends I have not told them anything about myself.

By speaking with the HO and gaining leave to remain, Participant 2's fears have been eliminated and they are happy because of this. Yet the process to get to this point was not linear, and shame about their experiences as well as fear of the repercussions if they disclosed everything meant initially that the "full" picture was not given. The impetus to hide their past becomes apparent when they switch in mid-sentence to describe how they have not told their friends. Thus, whilst for them the process has ultimately been positive, the conflict which prevented full disclosure at the initial substantive interview remains, and their instinct is to keep their early life hidden.

4. A Destructive Process

HO Interviews were described as destructive and damaging psychologically. For many this destruction extended past the interview and was endemic in all aspects of participants life as they fought to be accepted by a system that professed to offer sanctuary yet behaved as though they were not deserving of it.

Negative Psychological Consequences During the Process

Participants described how during the process deterioration in mental health manifested in various ways: flashbacks; a sense of madness; or a sadness borne of frustration. The impact on emotional health was explicitly described as torture in some cases. Participant 9 states:

I don't know much, but I think the HO, I think it's just like torture.

Although it was not a requirement of this study to talk about the reasons for seeking asylum, most participants spoke explicitly about experiencing torture or other acts of interpersonal violence prior to coming to the UK and all participants alluded to it. These prior experiences (which reflect the referral criteria of HBF) make the description of the process as torture both poignant and relevant. Often, when people describe something as 'torture', the word is used in a purely metaphorical way. Here, these are people who have *actually experienced* torture and interpersonal violence and experience the UK asylum process as akin to that.

This analogy perhaps sheds light on the disclosure that at that time death felt preferable to the suffering experienced while negotiating the UK asylum process. Participant 6 reflects:

many people would have claimed their life just because of this, because the truth is, it did come to mind at that time, I was like “should I just kill myself?”

Participant 8’s emotive account summarizes the negative psychological processes which culminated in giving up and wanting to die:

I never call myself guilty, because that’s not my problem [...], I haven’t done nothing wrong, I just, just fight for my help, for my right. I didn’t find anyone, anyone who could help me, then I become angry. [...] You ask yourself questions: What am I going to be like? [...] you will get stress and hate yourself [...] push you to hurting on yourself [...] when you walk on the road, you don’t care if car is coming or it is not, may be when you walk on bridge, that water, are you going to go in that water? You don’t care. You do whatever you want that time, because you give up, you don’t care about anything.

The extract speaks to the experiential trajectory described by many refugees over the course of their interviews. Participant 8 starts by describing how they can never call themselves guilty, referring to HO accusations that they have no right to UK refugee status. Additionally, the use of the word ‘guilty’ evokes assumptions of criminality, which speaks to the wider narrative that conceptualises people who seek asylum but have not been granted it as criminals. This “crime” is juxtaposed with how they makes sense of their actions; to fight for their rights and the help that is promised to refugees who come to the UK. Instead, they experience these promises as false. No help is offered from the HO; as they state, “*I try my best and they didn’t help me*”, leading to the sense of anger and hopelessness. The outward anger initially directed at the HO is now turned inward, and the participant’s sense of self is lost and, with it, the drive to live.

Ongoing Negative Psychological Consequences

Granting of asylum, for nearly all interviewed, did not bring reprieve from the psychological consequences of the HO process. Instead, they describe ongoing psychological injury related to the experience that has not been alleviated. Participant 10 states:

The fear and the whole distress, I tell them at the therapy, I still have it, I still have it. [...] I still get those feelings, it’s hard to get out of it.

Despite having leave to remain in the UK, the fear and distress from that time persists. It seems as if subjection to the process has resulted in a further trauma which is difficult to

escape. Participant 4 describes the ways the process has negatively impacted their core sense of self:

Home Office, the way they treat you [...] it makes you feel worthless you know like “I’m just nobody, I’m just a piece of a shit” and this shit is waiting for Home Office to be, you know picked up, or thrown away, you know whatever, it’s up to them. So, this is one thing [...] it’s still in me, even though I am strong [...], that helplessness was, there is a big part in my heart that feels like, “I was so helpless”. It’s still in me, that like at times I feel like I’m worthless. Yeah, this process makes you that, at some point.

The first part of the passage elucidates what the process did to their self-perception. Participant 4 is someone who saw themselves as someone strong with self-worth, but then feels reduced to “a piece of shit”, just waiting to be “thrown away”. This use of language highlights not only the dehumanisation felt by those interviewed but also the experiences of an unrelenting message that they are unwanted and unwelcome. For participant 4 the helplessness in the face of this treatment causes them to question their sense of identity. They describe the effect as if it were a virus (“*it’s still in me*”), and they are still infected by the experience, leaving them psychologically weakened, perhaps indefinitely. As they go on to state:

I feel like Home Office have given you a curse, you, you have to live with it. Maybe for the rest of your life.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of refugees’ experiences of the HO interview process when seeking asylum in the UK. The methodology adopted was an analysis of eight semi-structured interviews using IPA. Four superordinate themes were identified; “*Confronted by a Hostile System*”, “*Intra and Interpersonal Barriers at Interview*”, “*Moments of Reprieve*” and “*A Destructive Process*”.

The study revealed the experience of participants of entering a Kafkaesque system which, contrary to its stated purpose, is perceived as designed to ensure an applicant is rejected. HO interviews and interviewers are viewed as unnecessarily cruel by participants. The process is experienced as destructive, and the negative psychological impacts as enduring even once leave to remain had been granted.

Much has been written about the ‘Culture of Disbelief’ that is said to operate within the HO from those working with refugees (Bohmer & Shuman, 2018). These interviews substantiate this account and endorse the view that participants experience HO caseworkers as biased towards disbelief and discrediting applicants.

The decisions HO caseworkers must make are complex and some applicants intentionally use deception to gain refugee status. Yet the participants, all of whom had claims that ultimately proved successful, described a system they experienced as constructed to reinforce its preconceived disbelief of an applicant's claim. This supports previous research which has described the interview style of the HO as adversarial, with little opportunity for the applicant to explain themselves (Campbell, 2017). It is worth noting that the one participant who did not find their interviewer overbearing, did not get a positive decision initially, indicating that the participants' negative perceptions of the HO interviewers may not simply reflect the outcome.

The UK Government website states: “You must tell the caseworker everything you want them to consider, or it can count against you” (<https://www.gov.uk/claim-asylum/asylum-interview>). Yet it seems from the data and previous research (Abbas et al., 2021; Bögner et al., 2010) that this may not be possible initially. The study identified intrapersonal barriers to transforming the experiences which prompted participants to seek asylum. This is in accord with previous research on the impact of shame (Bögner et al., 2010) and trauma (Herlihy, Jobson, & Turner, 2012) on a person’s ability to disclose and narrate their experiences coherently, particularly if they do not fully trust the interviewer (Brand et al., 2017); and the role of fear, particularly for those who have been trafficked (Van der Watt & Kruger, 2017).

Participants identified that a listening, trusting environment which provided time and space was often essential for their experiences and emotions to be transformed into words. The overall sentiment from participants seemed to be that whilst it was not impossible to talk about their reasons for seeking asylum in a complete and coherent manner, to do this at the initial interview and particularly in contexts which did not feel open and safe, was an unrealistic and possibly unreasonable requirement.

A key theme from the study was the destructive impact on the self. This destruction of psyche was described as experienced during the process of seeking refugee status. This is particularly exemplified by Participant 8’s description of the emotional trajectory of being

treated as a criminal for seeking rightful sanctuary, and the transformation because of the experience of treatment from the HO from fighting for their rights to losing their sense of self and will to live. The poor mental health found among refugees, in comparison to the general population, has been attributed to both pre-migratory (Fazel et al., 2005) peri and post-migratory experiences (Steel et al., 2009). Miller and Rasmussen (2017) argue that uncertainty regarding refugee status, possible detention, and a lack of basic resources engender continuous stressors which refugees have limited or no control over are in many cases, the cause of deteriorating mental health. This illustrates how, whilst pre-migratory traumas may be a source of emotional distress, this cannot be assumed to be the primary source of distress among refugees. The associations between post-migration problems and mental health problems are broadly supported by the growing evidence suggesting that post-migration stressors are related to poorer mental health in refugees and asylum seekers (Carswell, Blackburn, & Barker, 2011). That the asylum process increases the likelihood of psychological difficulties (Morgan, Melliush, & Welham, 2017) and is a significant source of distress (Jannesari, Molyneaux, & Lawrence, 2019). In a comprehensive review Jannesari, Hatch, Prina, and Oram (2020) reported that factors relating to the asylum interview were key components in all general post-migration stress score measures. The experiences of the participants in this study support this conclusion.

Previous studies on the psychological impacts of the asylum process have found that gaining refugee status lowered distress levels (Ryan, Kelly, & Kelly, 2009) and led to substantial improvement in mental health, anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Silove et al., 2007). Yet in this study, most participants interviewed indicated that they still suffered negative psychological effects because of the interview process. That, despite being granted refugee status, the negative impact on their mental health, directly related to the HO process was still ongoing.

A possible explanation is the HO interview process was experienced as a Moral Injury (MI). MI is defined as “a betrayal of what’s right by a person in legitimate authority, or by one’s self” (Shay, 2014, p. 182). Research with refugees in Australia who fit an MI-other (the moral injury came from the actions of another) profile were more likely to have experienced immigration challenges (Hoffman, Liddell, Bryant, & Nickerson, 2019). An MI-other profile is associated with increased rates of PTSD, anger, depression, and poorer mental health among refugees (Hoffman, Liddell, Bryant, & Nickerson, 2018). Research with traumatized refugees in Germany (Schock, Rosner, & Knaevelsrud, 2015) also found that the

perceived justice of the asylum interview was predictive of increased posttraumatic intrusions. There has been little research into the long-term impacts of MI with refugees in the UK. The impact of post-migratory experiences directly related to the UK asylum procedure and association with perceived MI could be an interesting avenue of research.

Although there is little control over what has happened to refugees before coming to the UK, many post-migratory stressors are readily manageable through HO procedures and policy. Changing these may positively modify health outcomes for refugees in the UK. To echo the summary comment from the Windrush Report, there is a need for the HO to “change its culture to recognise that migration and wider Home Office policy is about people and, whatever its objective, should be rooted in humanity” (Williams, 2020, p. 136). It may be that some steps are needed to create a culture of curiosity rather than one of suspicion and disbelief.

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