

Asylum Seekers' Credibility Burden: Managing Trauma in the Asylum Process without Collective Support

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Abstract

In cases of asylum, individual asylum seekers experience victimization and discrimination on the basis of a social identity, however, the process of seeking government protection from a host society is an individualized course of action. The U.S. asylum system provides the legal means for asylum seekers to apply for permanent residency status based on their ability to document valid claims of persecution. Qualitative interviews with individuals applying for asylum (n=14) reveal an underlying uncertainty based on themes of fear in sharing their story, fear of denial, and consideration of alternative plans while awaiting the asylum decision. This paper focuses on referencing the first hand accounts of asylum seekers in order to critically examine the trauma associated with the U.S. asylum system. The research asserts that the individualized process of asylum and the public perception that valid claims would be endorsed fails to acknowledge the asylum system as a source of detrimental barriers and trauma itself. And since asylum seekers participate in this process individually, the inability of adopting a cultural trauma frame serves to maintain the asylum system's status quo and direct burden on the asylum seeker for the outcome of his or her case.

Keywords: Asylum, Trauma, Insecurity, Social Agency

Current asylum statistics reveal an exponential increase in asylum seekers during 2014 (UNHCR 2014). Of the early findings for the "first half of 2014, 330,700 claims were filed, [...] 52,800 of the claims filed in the U.S." (UNHCR, 2014). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees predicts these initial findings will exceed previous years' rates, and the country of origin contributing to the high rate of asylum seekers is currently Syria (UNHCR 2014).

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The UNHCR indicates that in 2013, there were “612,700 individuals whom applied for asylum; 88,400 claims were submitted in the U.S.”(UNHCR, 2014:1). The UNHCR clarifies that despite the high number of applications, “acceptance rates vary widely” (UNHCR, 2014). Statistics reflect that displacement and refugee populations have also increased (UNHCR, 2014).

According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is defined as “a person owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it” (UNHCR, 2014).

An asylum seeker is often characterized under the 1951 refugee convention statute, but implies that the person’s “claim has not yet been definitively evaluated” (UNHCR, 2014). The U.S. is a signatory of the UN 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 protocol (UNHCR, 2014). According to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, asylum is defined as an individual who comes to the U.S. “seeking protection because they have suffered persecution or fear that they will suffer persecution due to race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” (USCIS, 2014). The U.S. asylum system requires an asylum seeker to file an I-589 form within one year of arriving in the U.S. (USCIS, 2014). The form requires documentation, written statements, and a biometrics check. Upon the application being accepted, the asylum seeker is required to take part in an interview with an asylum agent. After the interview, the case is pending until a decision is reached. Approved cases will identify the asylum seeker as a “lawful permanent resident,” while a denied case is subject to removable hearings, although an appeal can be exercised (USCIS, 2014).

1. Literature Review

Conditions of persecution in which asylum seekers are vulnerable to violence prompt them to migrate toward safe zones in order to decrease their vulnerability.

Forced migration primarily due to the immediacy of moving and the unfamiliarity associated with the migration route, and entry and subsequently reception to the host society involves numerous risks (Ashford, 2008; Wood, 2006; Ahearn & Noble, 2004; Schafer, 2002; Castles, 2003; De Jongh, 1994; Boersma, 2003; Harris, 2003).

Moreover, the salience of uncertainty marginalizes asylum seekers and counters their agency efforts (see Rider, 2013; De Jongh, 1994). By comparing political refugees/asylum seekers to economic migrants, Castles (2003, p. 17) suggests that economic migrants access more resources and support networks that contribute to their abilities to successfully migrate and adapt to a host country. Within the context of political refugees/asylum seekers, individuals are unable to access resources or make informed decisions to the extent of voluntary migrants as a result of their forced migration to seek protection.

1.1 International Border Security and Degree of Entry

Despite contentious issues of conflict and other forms of persecution that account for the high degree of asylum applications in the U.S. and in other host countries, the ability for an asylum seeker to receive permanent residency status is subject to critical review by asylum agents (Black, 2003). Due to many nation-states addressing an influx of undocumented migrants and concerns for border security generally, asylum seekers face suspicion of their validity (Castenada, 2008; Einolf, 2001; Chavez, 1997; Black, 2003; Ranger, 2005; Mountz, Wright, Miyares, & Bailey, 2002; Schafer, 2002; Uçarer, 1989; Loescher, 1989; Abeyratne, 1999). Although these perceptions are questionable with regard to the rights associated to refugees and asylum seekers, host states have claimed that they are seeking to verify asylum seekers and support border security measures (Ricoeur, 2010; Kivisto & Faist, 2009; Welch & Schuster, 2005; Einolf, 2001; Neumayer, 2005; Loescher, 1989).

1.2 Forced Migration Circumstances

Asylum seekers face a plentitude of insecurities and lack of resources that contribute to their vulnerability. Specifically, asylum seekers experience a liminal zone in which they flee from persecution, encounter risks in traveling to a host society, and struggle to adapt to the host society as they seek asylee status. This process of refuge/asylum incorporates a heightened degree of marginality and vulnerability because they must successfully achieve asylee status (Ranger, 2005; Sarre, 1999).

Theoretical models substantiate the differences between economic migrants and asylum seekers by accounting for less privilege among asylum seekers due to forced migration conditions (Richmond, 1993; Kunz, 1973).

As a result, political refugees and asylum seekers are characterized as “reactive migrants,” due to lack of autonomy (Richmond, 1993, p. 10; Riddle & Buckley, 1998, p. 237; Kunz, 1973, p. 131). Similarly, research indicates that refugees and asylum seekers encounter significant push factors, which lead to migration (Davenport, Moore, & Poe, 2003, p. 32; Schmeidl, 1997, p. 302; Hakovirta, 1993, p. 43). Victimization faced by refugees and asylum seekers are depicted by Moore and Shellman (2007, p. 601) as “whether to abandon one’s home” and where to relocate” in order to escape persecution. Economic migrants on the other hand may also feel a sense of urgency to migrate, but they often have greater privilege to plan (Massey et al., 1993, p. 434). Consequently, political refugees and asylum seekers’ vulnerability associated with the country of origin often persists as they enter a host state with minimal knowledge and resources (De Jongh, 1994, p. 222; Kissoon, 2010).

1.3 The Asylum Process

Although evidence substantiates the limited agency of refugees and asylum seekers, nation state policies require asylum seekers to prove and document their eligibility for asylum (Schuster, 2011; Sarre, 1999; Ranger, 2005; Schafer, 2002; Barnett, 2002; Rider, 2013). However, the process in verifying eligibility is bound with barriers and challenges that undermine the rights stated in the 1951 Refugee Convention (see Rottman, Fariss, & Poe, 2009; Black, 2003; Loescher, 1989). Although committed to accepting asylum seeker applicants, host states are struggling to integrate them (Einolf, 2001; Widgren, 1987, p. 601). Measures have been adopted by nation-states to decrease undocumented migrants (via criminalization) as well as indirectly restrict asylum seekers (Engbersen & Leerkes, 2010, p. 211; Demleitner, 2010, p. 229; Kivisto & Faist, 2009; Schuster, 2011; Black, 2003; Rottman et al., 2009; Loescher, 1989; Abeyratne, 1999; Mountz et al., 2002; Neumayer, 2005; Barnett, 2002). For instance, policies that facilitate non-officials to make asylum reviews have complicated the process for asylum seekers (Rottman et al., 2009; Eades, 2005; Loescher, 1989; Uçarer, 1989:292; Abeyratne, 1999; Barnett, 2002; Mountz et al., 2002).

The ability to develop a sound claim for asylum is often scrutinized by asylum officers who perceive asylum seekers as potential false claimants (Shuster, 2011; Crawley, 2010; Stabile & Rentschler, 2005; Ranger, 2005; Pickering, 2007; Shafer, 2002; Mountz et al., 2002; Visweswaran, 2004, p. 490; Welch & Schuster, 2005; Black, 2003; Abeyratne, 1999).

Asylum seekers tend to struggle to overcome these barriers in providing an adequate case by attempting to be strategic, such as seeking false documents or describing generalized accounts of persecution (Bohmer & Shuman, 2007; Ranger, 2005; Barnett, 2002; Shafer, 2002; Stabile & Rentschler, 2005, p. 17). The overwhelming issue is that international policy and its enforcers neglect to acknowledge the coerced conditions that refugees and asylum seekers' experience, and the difficulties they encounter as they exercise agency from a coerced, traumatized, and liminal space (Kissoon, 2010; Shuman & Bohmer, 2004; Einolf, 2001; Rider, 2013).

1.4 Structure and Agency in the Process of Establishing Trauma

The context of forced migration of asylum seekers as a result of persecution places this particular group in a space of liminality. Specifically, the term "liminality" is defined according to Turner (1969, p. 95) as "entities [that] are neither here nor there [. . .]. [A]s liminal beings they have no status, property, or insignia [. . .]". Asylum seekers forced to escape the violent conditions of their country of origin experience vulnerability not only in their immediate context due to uncertainty, limited resources, and preparation to escape, but also in the asylum process. Pickering (2007, p. 30) argues that "[w]ithin this narrative, asylum-seekers are considered an alien group with no connection to the body politic or to the cultural or social mores of the nation in which they seek asylum." Here, they lack autonomy and decision-making power to voluntarily migrate (Schafer, 2002, p. 31). In addition, asylum seekers must present asylum cases that document their experiences of persecution in order to gain asylee status. This process is difficult because asylum seekers are unauthorized to work (USCIS, 2014), and lack the necessary resources, knowledge, and stable mental state to navigate the asylum system efficiently. In this sense, their experience of insecurity and marginality in their country of origin remain a constant factor as they not only escape persecution, but also undergo the asylum process in a host country (Rider, 2013).

Trauma plays a critical role in the agency process of asylum seekers as they negotiate forced migration and asylum while also managing their experiences of persecution (De Jongh, 1994; Ahearn & Noble, 2004; Kanter, 2008; Boersma, 2003). Their degree of agency as a result is reduced to mitigating risks associated with migration in an effort to secure their access to safety. Taylor and Osborne (2010, p. 106) distinguish between collective and individual trauma by stating that "collective trauma [. . .] implies that all members of the group share the same daunting challenge.

In contrast, individually based trauma is experienced against the backdrop of a community, the majority of whom are not having to cope with the individual's crisis." This clarification is useful because asylum seekers are experiencing either an individual or collective trauma, however, it may be vital in the asylum process to access communal support. As asserted by Taylor and Osborne (2010), a focus on cultural identity healing can lead to positive coping methods for trauma (see also Johnson, Thompson, & Downs, 2009). Trauma can be extended beyond events; particular victims of trauma describe their life experiences as traumatic due to continuous persecution (Johnson et al., 2009, p. 411).

Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, and Sztompka's (2004, p. 10) theory of the social construction of trauma introduces a prominent placing of agency in the ability for a social group to identify and validate their experiences of trauma. Significantly, Alexander et al. (2004, p. 12) accomplish two important facets of the construction of trauma which includes: the agency of victims in acknowledging trauma; and second, the role of an objective audience that mitigates the degree of legitimacy of trauma claims. In addressing the process of the emergence and management of trauma claims that pertain to cultural trauma theory, social groups must actively enact agency and respond to the conditions set by outsiders (Alexander et al., 2004). A social group has the ability to create a collective identity based on trauma. Research conducted by Yildiz and Verkyten (2011, p. 259) reveal that the persecution of Alevis in Turkey facilitated social activism to identify with other persecuted groups under experiences of shared victimization.

One of the significant aspects extracted from the cultural trauma theory (Alexander et al., 2004) is the balance involved in the relationship between structure and agency in which agency is rendered dependent on structural conditions, and structural limitations can be addressed by the agency of individuals simultaneously. For example, Alexander et al. (2004, p. 12) state that [t]he goal of the speaker is persuasively to project the trauma claim to the audience-public.

In doing so, the carrier group makes use of the particularities of the historical situation, the symbolic resources at hand, and the constraints and opportunities provided by institutional structures.

In examining this process several characteristics of the mutual interconnection between agency and structure can be devised. Individuals must actively be conscious of their experience of trauma by labeling it as a problematic situation associated with the collective group.

Despite the agency associated with victims making trauma claims, their activities are directly related to structural conditions and others' degree of validation, which affects how the trauma is conceptualized and represented. Accordingly, the trauma experiences of a particular social group may not be accurately legitimated and accepted by outsiders, which derives from previous hierarchical relations of dominance and subordination (Alexander et al., 2004, p. 21). Research on cultural trauma illustrate the process of activism in restoring normalcy. Specifically, David (2008) in a study on the experiences of women survivors of Hurricane Katrina, finds that survivors socially mobilized using disaster symbols and asking members of Congress and state officials to address the ongoing detrimental conditions in New Orleans. In applying the framework of cultural trauma, the activism demonstrated by "Women of the Storm" contributed to the identification of cultural trauma and the demand for a public response (David, 2008).

In examining these potential outcomes, the conceptualization of agency is not necessarily depicted as invalid, but the structural conditions and role of other social groups may challenge the abilities for victims to seek and demonstrate autonomy. The migration-asylum process involves continuous risk: trauma is associated with persecution; the migration process involves unfamiliarity and insecurity; adapting to the host society is challenging; and for the focus of this article, the asylum process and the outcome is uncertain (De Jongh, 1994; Ahearn & Noble, 2004; Kanter, 2008; Boersma, 2003; Einolf, 2001; Schuster, 2011; Rider, 2013; Bohmer & Shuman, 2004). The juxtaposition of persecution in the country of origin as traumatic and the asylum system in the host society to serve a resolution as a safe haven depicts the asylum system in a positive way that may not be reflected by asylum seekers themselves. In applying the theory of cultural trauma as a claims process (Alexander et al., 2004) is an insightful framework to explore problems with the asylum system. Asylum seekers are burdened with the responsibility of making a valid, sound claim to receive permanent residency status.

The officials and public, serving the role of the audience, identifies claims as either accepted or denied. The basis of denied claims may not result from a weak or fraudulent case, but from the inability of an asylum seeker to have the agency and means to develop a sound case (Rider, 2013; Shuman & Bohmer, 2004). Since agents and the public are not involved in the practical steps of the asylum process, they may be limited in their ability to empathize with the struggles of asylum seekers.

In this article, I argue that asylum seekers are unable to present the asylum system as traumatic based on the following interrelated factors: the system is viewed as a solution to persecution; asylum seekers are individually held accountable for the outcome decisions of their case; asylum seekers lack collective solidarity with other asylum seekers; and the lay audience itself is unable to fully grasp the uncertainty that jeopardizes the asylum seekers' confidence and case development. The remaining sections of this paper will present qualitative data from asylum seekers' experiences of trauma navigating the U.S. asylum system; provide theoretical insight into the limitations of the system; and critically examine the individualized context of the asylum system that hinders a collective recognition of cultural trauma experienced by asylum seekers.

2. Methods

The present study focuses on a retrospective account of asylum seekers/asylees discussing their experiences negotiating the asylum process and international policy. The sample size is 14 participants. The sample offers the ability to seek detailed information from diverse individuals. There is limited research that qualitatively explores asylum seekers' experiences (Einolf, 2001; Shuman & Bohmer, 2004; Ranger, 2005; Mountz et al., 2002; Harris, 2003). In this study, asylum seekers are defined as individuals currently involved in the asylum process, specifically having filed their application and participated in the interview. Asylees refer to individuals who have successfully completed the asylum process and have been granted asylee status. Eligible participation in the study was based on individuals having completed the application and interview phases and received a decision outcome, albeit the process was still in progress, or individuals who had completed the asylum process with one of the following outcomes to their status: granted, denied, or received another form of legal status.

Data was collected through individual in-depth interviews in order to maintain confidentiality and enable the participants to share their particular accounts.

The research project including informed consent materials and data collection was approved by an Institutional Review Board. Each participant provided voluntary consent to participate in the study. I used a semi-structured, open-ended interview guide in order to ensure the same questions were asked to all of the participants for comparison during the coding and analysis stages. The open-ended format enabled the participants to answer the questions based on their own beliefs and experiences.

The interview guide was divided into the following sections: information about the asylum process, filing the application and attending the interview, the time period awaiting a decision, and the overall experience including recommendations to improve the process. This last section facilitated a dialogue in which participants could provide suggestions and advice to future asylum seekers or craft modifications to improve the asylum system. Along with audio-taping the interviews, I also took notes. I transcribed the interviews verbatim. The coding procedure used the qualitative software program, *NVivo 8* in order to organize the data by emergent themes. Coding was conducted by taking initial notes, expanding notes, and jotting down themes in the form of free writes, and identifying themes in each interview, as well as collectively. Once I identified general themes, I used the qualitative software program to note when participants' experiences corresponded to or diverged with the themes. Based on the emergent themes, I developed frameworks utilizing existing literature in order to comprehend and analyze participants' experiences navigating the U.S. asylum system.

In the results section, participants are referred to by pseudonyms to protect their identities. Demographic information describes the sample as mostly originating from countries in Africa and the Middle East; processing of the cases ranged between 6 months and 15 years; in reference to gender, the sample included women (10) and men (4); the primary motive for entry into the U.S. was asylum (8), although several participants entered under a visa status, but then their situations changed to a status of asylum seekers (6); nine participants received asylee status, two were originally denied, but given another form of legal status, and three participants were denied, yet proceeded to the appeals process at the time of being interviewed. The results section is organized around three significant themes: fear in sharing their story during the interview stage; fear of a denial in the decision outcome; and the making of alternative plans in anticipation of a possible denied case. Verbatim quotes of the participants are used in the results section.

3. Results

3.1 Insecurity and Trauma: The Asylum Experience

Throughout the asylum process, the barriers encountered by asylum seekers contribute to their degree of stress, uncertainty, and insecurity. Asylum seekers main motive to attain asylum is to gain protection from persecution, however, despite the ability to apply, their right to asylum status is not guaranteed (Schuster, 2011).

The process requires that they prove their circumstances and demonstrate evidence of their victimization. Although the asylum process is considered a right to those individuals who qualify for protection, the process is organized based on the individual responsibility for asylum seekers to obtain information and submit the necessary documents. In consideration of the asylum process, the general public presumes that if individuals experienced persecution, and followed the necessary steps to showcase their evidence, then the result of this action would be the attainment of asylee status. Furthermore, those that were unable to acquire status would be stereotyped as making false claims and not in "true" need of asylum. Based on the experiences of the participants in this study and in correlation to existing research on deterrent measures, individuals with "valid" claims to asylum experience challenges in gaining status. Even in cases in which evidence exists and resources are accessible, individuals are likely to deal with various barriers that contribute to distress and vulnerability (Rider, 2013). The individual responsibility ideology serves as a basis for the asylum process with regard to the expectation that individuals will be motivated and able to take part in the process by demonstrating their qualifications for asylee status (Shuman & Bohmer, 2004).

Among the participants in the study, some individuals reported a fairly easy process in attaining asylum and characterized the process as fair. Other participants experienced greater disadvantages in attempting to gain asylee status, which contributed to a longer process and the possibility or actuality of being denied asylum. In acknowledgement of the varying experiences throughout the process, a consistent theme amongst the majority of participants was a sense of insecurity and uncertainty that could be associated as trauma. The prevalence of lack of security and certainty was evident in individuals' claims of constant worrying and nervousness sharing their story with lawyers and asylum officers, wondering if the case would be denied, and contemplating plans if the case was denied.

3.2 Insecurity in Sharing Story

Participants in this study were able to exert various degrees of agency to overcome barriers and strategically assemble a sound case to attain status. Regardless of their success in certain case outcomes, or perseverance to gain status, the presumption of false claims and lack of cultural understanding contributed to uncertainty and vulnerability. Several individuals disclosed a fear in sharing and unveiling the details of their story with strangers.

Interestingly, the expectation that asylum seekers can present a valid case by proving their victimization neglects to acknowledge the stress and burden, and potential re-traumatization of the process particularly in regard to sharing humiliating and traumatic experiences with outsiders (Rider, 2013; Shuman & Bohmer, 2004; Einolf, 2001). For instance, Asad reports his uneasiness discussing his victimization to female lawyers, by stating "when you go through certain things and you have to explain them, you never have even talked it, you never have told anyone. It had been your secret. It was a little bit too much. So I preferred writing it down, and then if she [the lawyer] had questions, then okay, ask what is was."

Here, a barrier to telling his story was sharing the details of his victimization to other individuals, who were female. This barrier serves to minimize the legitimacy of his case since he has to find ways to become confident in order to persuade the asylum officer. Re-counting the story of victimization was also troublesome for Naledi, which she describes as "at some point I almost gave up because I didn't feel comfortable talking about it." The trauma in talking about victimization is a significant concern for individuals because their only way to attain asylee status is to explain their case. Thus, status rests on the capability of asylum seekers to present their experience by describing how their sense of security is threatened in their country of origin. Asylum seekers experience a daunting task because they are individually responsible for making a persuasive case to the asylum agent. Farida notes a similar concern by recollecting that she did not want to talk about certain things and withheld details of her story. During the interview she wanted to keep the story brief. She struggled re-telling her story due to reliving the trauma and sharing it with an asylum officer. Asylum seekers must manage the risk of re-telling their experience or avoiding sharing all parts of their story. Regardless of the action asylum seekers take, they are likely to experience additional trauma or increase their chance of denial.

In these cases, survivors of persecution experience re-traumatization when proving their case throughout the asylum process. Additionally, many individuals were asked to not only re-tell their stories multiple times, but also had to respond to lawyers and asylum agents' disbelief and blatant questions of why their experience should entitle them to permanent residency. Kafele notes that his sense of distrust prevented him from feeling capable of seeking help and sharing information about his victimization. Specifically, he explains that "they [legal organization] tried to ask me questions and I was trying to withhold myself because I wasn't trust[ing] anybody."

See if I tell this person then they will be on the wrong side and I will be killed. That's what is going to happen. That was what was in my mind."

This revelation shows how a lack of trust developed as a survival strategy undermines individuals' ability to secure asylum. The foundation of individual responsibility to prove one's case and persuade asylum agents requires individuals to overcome their distrust and suspicion. Asylum seekers experience an inherent disadvantage in the asylum system because although the system provides an opportunity for security, the background survival strategies and coping mechanisms employed by asylum seekers limit their capability of securing status. In consideration of the emphasis on sharing the story of persecution, the asylum seeker is placed in a precarious situation in which he or she must provide sufficient details of the persecution as a way to secure status, even if this process incurs trauma and emotional distress.

3.3 Fear of Denial

Uncertainty with regard to the outcome of the asylum process, specifically whether an individual is approved or denied status, is a prevalent and continuous aspect of stress for asylum seekers in this study. Significantly, even for individuals who are confident in their case and their likelihood of attaining status, they still experience anxiety while taking part in the interview and/or awaiting the interview decision. For example, Layla describes her emotional state as "nervous," claiming that "I don't know what's going to happen because her [the asylum agent] yay or nay will determine my life. So until the day I got the letter, my approval, I don't know if I even slept five hours. I was just under terrible stress." The time period between the interview and the decision letter increased her sense of stress.

As for Elisabeta, her response to the possibility of being denied asylum after trying to get status for the past fifteen years is expressed in the following statement: "I am actually a strong woman [. . .] by that time I just give up. I was crying. [. . .] I was yelling what kind of justice is here? I cannot go through this anymore, and I was telling my husband I would rather be dead than what we went through. I would rather be dead than what went through in the United States here."

Her statement reveals that in recollecting over the entire process and the negative experience in the courtroom increased her sense of trauma and insecurity. Anticipating a possible denied case generates a concern about further persecution. As illustrated by Senghor, he describes feeling "really panicked [...] I was trying to explain to them if I am deported, it will [be] forever [...] I was telling them I had no choice."

His statement shows a sense of urgency for the asylum agents to understand the dire circumstances if sent back to his origin country. While awaiting the outcome, his sense of fear demonstrates how the process of asylum can bring about a high degree of vulnerability and distress. Similarly, Makena discusses a generalized fear by claiming "I was just worried about my future or what was going to happen, am I going to be granted an asylum case or like the man [asylum agent] say they going to [return me to] my country." Her concern reveals the uncertainty not only waiting for an official evaluation of her case, but also the possibility that the case may be rejected.

Other asylum seekers in the study reveal the physical symptoms of stress they experienced while waiting on the outcome of their case. For instance, Saran documents feelings of fear by saying "I put on a lot of weight just from the pressure. I have acne. I was taken to the emergency room the other day because of serious chest problems. I was just praying for this thing [asylum process] to be over." Her diminishing physical and mental health provides evidence of the continuance of trauma based on a concern of re-victimization. Layla, in addition to her statement aforementioned, expresses that "my days had been spending the whole day crying." The pervasiveness of uncertainty shows how the asylum process can be traumatizing to candidates. The experience involves vulnerability because ultimately each asylum seeker's case rests upon official interpretation and decision of asylum officers.

Despite the asylum seekers presenting what they believe are valid cases of persecution to qualify for permanent residency many of them encountered insecurity.

In each of these examples, the constant pressure and need to attain asylee status placed the asylum seekers in a state of emotional distress, especially given denial as a possible outcome. Although while in the U.S. asylum seekers are protected from persecution, the process of protection is temporary until their cases become approved. If denied, there is a threat of being returned to the context of persecution.

3.4 Decision Outcome Uncertainty: Alternative Plans

Gaining asylum status was the main priority of asylum seekers. All of their efforts and decisions that were made concerned their ability to increase their chances toward securing asylee status. Although they actively sought the right to asylee status by proving their case, many of the participants in the study were aware of the possibility that they could be denied. In the case of denial, some participants were aware of an appeals process as an alternative option. For instance, Farida acknowledged that if her asylum claim was denied, she could contact an attorney.

This acknowledgement of an appeals process reveals that even if the case was to be denied, some individuals would continue to work within the system by appealing the decision in order to continue to claim their right to asylum.

Other individuals responded to the potential of denial by waiting for the decision prior to considering alternative plans. Their plan to wait enables them to cope with their uncertainty and also to take into consideration the circumstances in order to prepare the most appropriate response. Accordingly, Cheikh when asked if he had a plan on how to deal with a possible denial, he asserted that "I don't even want to think about it." This statement illustrates the pressure experienced by asylum seekers to acquire status. Many of the participants planned to devise a strategy if they were informed that their case was denied. For instance, Kiah claims that "I didn't make any plans. I wanted to have the results first before I was making any plans." Even though she characterizes her lack of plans until she knew the decision, her consciousness of having to make potential plans demonstrates her sense of agency in preparing to deal with the outcome of the situation. Saran expressed a similar sentiment by stating "I don't know what is going to happen. I don't know. I don't know, I just pray that they give me [status]." Her choice to wait and remain hopeful also involved the consideration of the consequences of a denial; specifically, she describes that "maybe they have to take me to immigration jail and maybe take my kids into a foster home."

Although her fears indicate a possible lack of agency regarding her feelings of not being able to mitigate the conditions that would ensue from a denial, she does exert agency in being conscious of possible circumstances, and also maintaining a sense of hopefulness in her case. However, not knowing and hoping for an approved case can be anxiety-producing and stressful.

Other individuals actively developed potential alternative plans to remain in the U.S. either by appealing the denial, secretly residing with an illegal status, or returning to their country of origin. According to the possibility of denial, Layla states that "I didn't know what to do, but I would ask myself what I am going to do, should I put my [child] to adoption? Should I run away? Stuff like that, I thought about that." The active consideration of alternative plans exposes a mitigation strategy to find another way to protect her child and herself from persecution. However, her envisioned options were fatalistic in a sense, and seem traumatic to contemplate. In Barika's situation, she considered ways to return to her country of origin and escape detection.

For instance, she asserts that I was [. . .] thinking of what would be the best way of getting back home without the authorities, you know, without anyone knowing that I was actually back home. [. . .] I could fly [. . .] and come by road [. . .] I could easily pay for someone to pass me through the border and without them [officials] knowing that I was getting into the country, but the problem was that when I would be back home then what? I could not leave the house for the rest of my life [. . .] because the minute you go out neighbors could see that you are back and word goes around, so that was my problem and then what?

Her plans take into account the limitations and long-term degree of effectiveness in her ability to find ways to mitigate short-term entry and detection, as well as a more permanent residence in her country of origin. The ability to consider an alternative and thought-out plan demonstrates that in circumstances when the aimed end cannot be achieved, she was able to continue to strategize ways to mitigate persecution, albeit her solution involved risk of further persecution. She would be at constant risk of detection if this plan were to be implemented.

As for Adanya, she made plans to discuss alternative plans as the decision came closer.

Specifically, she states that “if it don’t work we have to find a solution, but I don’t wanna. I am really tired because I am finding a place, if we can find a place where we can go. Go somewhere if he [family member] has a friend somewhere where we can get home and hide [. . .]. We are going to go there. I am tired I don’t want to take it anymore.”

Adanya is also active in considering options in the case of a denial by trying to figure out the most effective strategies to combat risks of deportation and persecution. In considering a denial of asylee status, Makena asserts that “I had made up my mind that if I have to I was going to stay here [in the host country] like uh like as a illegal immigrant if I had to because I really did not want to back to my country. [. . .] I knew all the consequences for that [returning to her country of origin] so I had made up my mind that even if I had to say here illegally to hide, to the immigration people, I was going to take the risk to do that.”

The aforementioned fear of denial was one factor that contributed to distress and insecurity among asylum seekers’ process. The insecurity and risk associated with illegal citizenship status was a strategy to avoid the risk of further persecution in the country of origin.

The association of illegitimate means to avoid persecution in these cases derives from the possible outcomes of the legitimate process of applying for asylum and the possibility that the right to asylee status is not guaranteed. Whether alternative plans were developed prior to the decision of the asylum agents or reserved if needed to mitigate a denial result, the consideration of alternative plans indicates a coping mechanism of trauma and a mitigation effort to insecurity. Many of the poorer solutions, such as going into hiding or returning to the origin country that risks persecution, exemplify the likelihood of further trauma. Anticipating a denial and a risky alternative solution contributes to increased trauma and fear.

Overall, taking part in the asylum process contributes to trauma with regard to re-telling their story and risking deportation. In acknowledgement of asylum seekers' understanding of and trusting the purpose of the asylum system, conditions of proving their stories and dealing with uncertainty of the outcome presents trauma in and of itself (Einolf, 2001; Shuman & Bohmer, 2004). Throughout the asylum process, asylum seekers must find resources and present their stories in order to attain status, which requires them to continuously manage uncertainty (Rider, 2013).

However, the experiencing of vulnerability diminishes their ability to successfully advance toward asylee status.

4. Discussion

4.1 Individualized Trauma and a Lack of a Collectivity: The Liminal Context

Multiple forms of trauma manifest in the context of escaping persecution, and continue to be a prevalent aspect for asylum seekers as they attempt to gain security in host societies. One of the problematic assumptions that minimizes the trauma asylum seekers encounter in the system is the emphasis on their victimization in their country of origin. The attention on the persecution indirectly limits the ability to acknowledge the trauma experienced in other aspects of forced migration and the asylum process. Automatically, a dichotomy emerges that positions persecution as the most traumatic experience on one end of a continuum with the asylum process and refuge in a host society on the other end of the continuum. This contrast tends to link the host society as the safety zone in which protection is upheld against the traumatic situation of persecution. However, based on the conditions of the asylum system, several asylum seekers in this study label and interpret their experiences attaining asylum as traumatic. Central to the asylum system is a precarious situation in which asylum seekers must secure residency status while also mitigating the fear of rejection in the process of asylum.

Although the asylum system is supposed to facilitate access to protection for asylum seekers, in practice, deterrent measures and stereotypes tend to overlook the conditions and needs of asylum seekers (Schuster, 2011). There are elements of power hierarchies in this process because the asylum seeker must persuade officers, and overcome their marginalization and discomfort in order to secure asylee status. At the micro level according to the findings in this study, asylum seekers refer to their experiences filing asylum as traumatic. In further elaborating on the trauma process as outlined by Alexander et al. (2004), asylum seekers lack an organized collectivity to express and mitigate the oppressive conditions. In this sense their experiences of trauma are withheld from a collective conscious due to the lack of solidarity among asylum seekers. Individually however, asylum seekers share similar accounts of their asylum process as a point of trauma (Einolf, 2001).

From the standpoint of the audience (Alexander et al., 2004), since the asylum process is associated with protection and support in contrast to persecution, to characterize the asylum system as a situation of trauma for asylum seekers would be perceived by the general public as an erroneous conclusion. In addition to the misperception of the asylum system as a safe zone, as aforementioned, there is the assumption that individuals can provide adequate proof of their eligibility for the right of asylum if they experienced persecution (Schuster, 2011). These two predominant beliefs about the asylum process serve to limit the ability to define the asylum process as a potential source of trauma. Furthermore, due to the marginality of asylum seekers, they lack the autonomy to make visible their traumatic experiences negotiating the asylum process and the acknowledgement by officers and outsiders that their claims for asylum can be valid independent of documentation. Instead, asylum seekers must manage the discriminatory views of officers and the larger public by meeting their requirements as to what justifies a valid asylum claim (Schuster, 2011; Welch & Schuster, 2005; Black, 2003; Abeyratne, 1999). This dominant evaluative position of the audience and officers automatically marginalizes the asylum seekers' ability to be validated for the persecution and trauma they experienced. There seems to be two different normative orientations (Parsons, 1968) at play in which the dominant position of the audience prevents the recognition of the inherent trauma in the asylum system. Since this institution is oriented at alleviating human rights injustice by offering permanent protection, the public is unable to critique the barriers associated with this process as conditions that exacerbate trauma.

5. Conclusion

Asylum seekers enter this system in an isolated way in which they seek individual claims lacking the ability to connect and receive support from other asylum seekers. The system becomes daunting because asylum seekers may lack the ability to display the experiences of cultural trauma, and the audience then becomes unaware and unknowledgeable about their persecution. As discussed in the results, asylum seekers experienced fear in sharing their stories and the possibility of a denied case, and pressure to devise alternative plans in anticipation of a negative outcome. These experiences of insecurity and stress weaken their abilities to present a clear case for asylum as well as aggravate the symptoms of trauma from persecution.

In applying the concept of “inclusive victimhood and unity in pain” discussed by Yildiz and Verkuyten (2011, p. 259), asylum seekers could embark on a shared identity to critically respond to barriers in the asylum process and rely on a collective support system (Johnson et al., 2009, p. 413).

Participants in this study provided recommendations to improve the process. The recommendations for asylum officers seemed to focus on ways to increase cultural understanding of the asylum seekers' circumstances of persecution and the subsequent desire for asylee status. Accordingly, the participants offered the following suggestions: to be more patient and understanding of their experiences; make sure that translator services are made known to assist those who need to be able to express their case; understand the challenges of telling one's story and if the story is believed, then allow them status; take into account that the decision is based on an hour interview, and that perhaps more research and verification needs to be considered in order to make an accurate decision; gain more knowledge of the country's conditions and also be aware of the lack of documented information available; and allow the asylum seeker to fully describe his or her own experience. Their recommendations seem reasonable given that the concerns address ways to create sound cases in a more comfortable setting, and increase the comprehension of their situation. Ideally, these suggestions would facilitate a better context for sharing stories of persecution, and enabling officers to make better judgments of the information of the claimant and the conditions in the country of origin.

The asylum system can be modified to validate the circumstances of asylum seekers. In other contexts addressing victimization of marginalized populations, feminist theories have sought ways to change definitions in order to support victims/survivors.

For example, feminist-based definitions of violence against women have sought for more inclusive definitions that mitigate the biases associated with patriarchal views (see for example Brownmiller, 1975, p. 18). For instance, the definition of sexual assault can be reformulated from the victim/survivor's perspective in which if she or he does not consent to sexual intercourse then it constitutes as rape (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 18). This framework is significant because it avoids the individual responsibility and proof typically asked of the victim. In a similar method, the definition of asylum could be revised to validate the liminality of asylum seekers and mitigate the practice of deterrent measures based on assumptions of false claims.

A working definition could begin similar to the definition of a refugee, and be based on the threat of or direct consequences of persecution, however, the entitlement to this right to asylum would be made valid by the individual asylum seeker. This process requires a shift in thinking about rights to asylum. Asylum seekers' claims should be credited given the fact that they are escaping persecution that directly harms their livelihoods, and based on this precarious situation, they have more limited ability to implement strategies and calculated decisions to the same extent that privileged actors are able to exert. Resolutions to the issue of migrants making false claims should not be considered as the asylum seekers' burden, especially considering that valid claims-makers are negotiating the system in a legitimate way to access their rights to protection.

As mentioned in the beginning of the paper, forced migration and applications for asylum are critical social issues occurring globally. As conflict, persecution, and human rights violations persist, individuals will look to the asylum system as a means for safety and security. There is a growing scholarly research agenda on refugees and asylum seekers that have offered critical insight into the various stages of migration and social issues confronting forced migrants. Further research should continue to look into asylum seekers experiences obtaining permanent residency status, as well as the strategies and resources they utilize to help ensure a strong case. Scholarly inquiry can also observe and assess the experiences of asylum agents and how agents determine the credibility of cases. Theoretical insight also has the ability to examine empirical findings to postulate meaning associated with agency, trauma, citizenship policies, and intervention practices. This article problematizes the barriers and traumatic circumstances within the asylum system that can undermine the ability for asylum seekers to receive protection and security.

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