

## LAND OF CARE SEEKING: PRE- AND POST-MIGRATORY EXPERIENCES IN ASYLUM SEEKERS' NARRATIVES

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*Integrating the psychodynamic framework on migration with the insights provided by the community psychology perspective, the present study aimed at exploring in-depth the pre-migratory, migratory and post-migratory experiences of 20 West-African male asylum seekers hosted in Italy and, through the adoption of a qualitative and narrative method, at understanding strengths and weaknesses of using narrative methods in research with asylum seekers. In-depth open ended interviews, were administered and then analysed through the software T-LAB. Thematic clusters identified from the analysis testified the intra-psychic, relational and contextual nature of trauma. Against the background of diverse human rights violations and identity challenges involved in the migration process, post-migratory narratives revealed several social and contextual determinants which exacerbated participants' suffering and vulnerabilities. The ambivalent function of narration in the context of forced migration encourages further reflection on the use of narrative methods in research with asylum seekers. Narrative features suggested that researchers and professionals should create more appropriate interview situations which, through the combination of different linguistic and expressive registers, can facilitate, mediate and support the narrative organisation of the experiences, which are often disrupted from severe traumatisation.*

**Keywords:** forced migratory experiences, male asylum seekers, Italy, qualitative research, narrative approach

### 1. The psychological approach to the “European refugee crisis”

By the end of 2018, around 69 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecutions, conflicts or human rights violations. Of these, the global refugee population stood at 26 million (UNHCR, 2018). In recent years, the term “European refugee crisis” was frequently used by mass-media to describe the increasing number of displaced people who entered Europe. According to Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou and Wodak (2018) the use of this expression had a specific political function aimed at stigmatising migrants and creating an alarmist connotation

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around the refugee discourse. Other scholars (D'Angelo, 2019; Gabrielli, 2017; Dinan, Nugent, & Paterson, 2017) have also highlighted that the description of the recent migration flows as a "crisis", in reality, rather than reflecting the exceptional nature of arrivals, describes the consequences these arrivals have had on EU Member States, as they were called to task over their inadequate handling of this situation. From our point of view, the use of the term "crisis" also highlights and transmits the sense of a wider affective, emotional and identity turmoil prompted by the contact with the foreigner Other and his/her suffering on individual, social as well as community levels. Without doubt, the huge numbers involved in the latest migratory flows worldwide, combined with a global governmental response of closure towards refugees, has made for a significant humanitarian emergency, which has transformed the present-day forced migration phenomenon into a social, political and psychological priority that needs to be addressed through multilevel strategies and actions.

From a psychological point of view, our approach to the study of forced migration focuses on the migrants themselves and their subjective and unique experience, as well as on the wider process of forced migration. This is because we recognise that the phenomenon of forced migration has individual, relational, socio-political and contextual dimensions that constantly interact and dialogue with each other.

As shown in a previous review (Tessitore & Margherita, 2017), psychological research among refugees and asylum seekers, on an international as well as national level, has developed in two main and distinct directions. The first takes a clinical and diagnostic perspective, focusing on the trauma experienced during migration and its effect on people's mental health. The second takes a psychosocial and community perspective, and investigates the role played by different post-migration factors and how they affect refugees' resettlement and well-being. More specifically, studies in the first stream evidenced that asylum seekers and refugees were at a higher risk of developing post-traumatic syndromes and other psychopathological disorders because of their exposure to traumatic events during the migration process (Belz, Belz, Özkan, & Graef-Calliess, 2017; Crepet et al., 2017; Giacco, Laxhman, & Priebe, 2017). A small percentage of these studies focused on protective factors, especially on the construct of resilience, revealing that forced migrants are better able to deal with a range of challenges after coping with the complexities and trauma of displacement compared to non-forced migrants (Simich & Andermann, 2014; Arnetz, Rofa, Arnetz, Ventimiglia, & Jamil, 2013). The psychosocial and community stream of research, on the other hand, recognises that the adverse effects of trauma are also compounded by different post-migration and psychosocial stress factors, such as lack of meaningful social roles, poverty, discrimination, isolation and barriers in access to health care services (Li, Liddell, & Nickerson, 2016; Carswell, Blackburn, & Barker, 2011). Several studies also highlighted that long asylum procedures have a negative impact on asylum seekers' quality of life and well-being (Laban, Komproe, Gernaat, & de Jong, 2008; Ryan, Benson, & Dooley, 2008), whereas high levels of perceived social and community support positively influence people's mental health status (Beiser & Hou, 2017). Community psychology studies are also central to understanding how forced and non-forced migrants and the members of their host communities develop a shared sense of community and membership (D'angelo, Corvino, De Leo, & Martín, 2019; Mannarini, Talò, Mezzi, & Procentese, 2018; Buckingham et al., 2018). In line with this, various authors have recently extended their analysis of the role acculturation plays in the process of adjustment to new cultures from migration to forced migration (Nakash, Nagar, Shoshani, & Lurie, 2015; Phillimore, 2011). Among others, differences between the two directions that the research has taken, as described above, also regards the methodological approach. In clinical and diagnostic research, we

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see a prevalence of quantitative instruments to measure clinical symptoms, whereas in the second, the approach is more likely to use qualitative and mixed-methodologies, combining the use of qualitative and quantitative instruments (Tessitore & Margherita, 2017).

Considering these premises, in our paper we approach migration as a complex phenomenon to be addressed at multiple levels of analysis. Several critical perspectives have claimed that a solely diagnostic approach to the so-called “refugee trauma” offers a limited view of the complexity of traumatic experiences which asylum seekers live and of their consequences on their mental health (Maercker, Heim, & Kirmayer, 2018; Droždek, Wilson, & Turkovic, 2012; Kirmayer, Lemelson, & Barad, 2007). Accordingly, and relying on a psychodynamic perspective, we acknowledge that a complex approach to trauma needs to go well beyond the diagnostic category of post-traumatic stress disorder and should be characterised by a simultaneous attention to its intra-psychic, interpersonal as well as socio-political components (Margherita & Tessitore, 2019). In line with Papadopoulos (2007), in spite of privileging the *devastating events phase*, we believe research with refugees and asylum seekers needs to adopt a wider view of the whole life story and consider that each temporal phase (pre-migratory, migratory and post-migratory) may or may not have a traumatising quality, and that migration can assume a potential traumatic value as well as a strong re-birth meaning (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989).

However, we also believe that recognition of the experience of displacement as a multilevel phenomenon requires that the psychodynamic perspective, with its complex view of trauma and attention to the symbolic and emotional nature of the intra-psychic and relational dynamics at play in this experience, should interact, above all, with a community psychology perspective, whose goals are to deepen the contextual and socio-political determinants of experiences, promote empowerment through support for the individual and community resources and explore the effects of unequal and unjust societal structures and relationships.

Finally, in terms of methodology, we acknowledge that the choice of methods to be used in research with migrants is an interesting but challenging issue, and one that requires careful choice, adaptation, validation or development of instruments for culturally sensitive research and practice. In line with various scholars who reported how few instruments had been specifically tested with refugees, and how inadequate quantitative measures were for exploring the complexity of forced migration (Vargas-Silva, 2012; Hollifield et al., 2002), we argue that more qualitative research is needed to further investigation into the subjectivity of the refugee experience.

The present study is part of a wider research-project carried out by the University of Naples Federico II in partnership with some Extraordinary Reception Centres in the Campania Region. Its general aim was to explore the forced migration experience, combining a focus on the individual and intra-psychic dimensions with a wider consideration of the social as well as contextual dimensions and their impact on the asylum seekers’ experiences. In particular, the study had two specific aims. First, it aimed to explore the subjective meanings that a group of asylum seekers attributed to their pre-migratory, migratory and post-migratory experiences in-depth, in an attempt to understand how these could also be influenced by social, political and contextual dimensions. In line with this, we adopted a qualitative and narrative method, considering narratives as something that allows people to give structure and meanings to their life events, and to co-construct new meanings within a relationship and a specific context (Gargiulo & Margherita, 2019; De Luca Picione, Martino, & Troisi, 2019; Margherita & Gargiulo, 2018; Margherita, Boursier, Gargiulo, & Nicolò, 2017; Margherita, Troisi, Tessitore, & Gargiulo, 2017). Thus, considering the need to reflect in-depth on the methodological approaches adopted in the field of research with forced

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migrants, in this paper we discuss the strengths and weaknesses of using narrative methods with asylum seekers.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1 *The wider context of the study: the Italian social and political situation*

In Italy, the highest record of arrivals was reached in 2016 when around 170.000 people arrived through the main migratory route across the Central Mediterranean Sea from Libya. By the end of 2017, the year in which the present study was carried out, around 130.000 individuals had requested international protection; most of them young men mainly coming from sub-Saharan Africa (Ministry of Interior, 2018). The Italian system of forced migrants' reception is complex and involves a multiple classification of centres. In 2002 the System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees (Italian acronym: SPRAR) was established. The SPRAR system, coordinated and monitored at national level, was managed by the Italian Association of Local Authorities. Including reception as well as hosting centres, it aimed to offer several other services, such as integration support, legal advice and psycho-social assistance. Due to its high standards, multi-agency structure and management costs, the SPRAR ended up delivering best practice to a relatively small number of people since the number of places was not enough to respond to the number of migrants entering Italy. For these reasons, in 2015, to deal with the so-called 'North-Africa Emergency', which indicated the arrival of thousands of North-African migrants seeking asylum from Libya, the Italian authorities, at that time led by the left-wing *Democratic Party*, created a parallel system of Extraordinary Reception Centres (Italian acronym: CAS). CAS are overseen by the Ministry of Interior provincial offices which allocate funds to private or third sector providers. Due to the less strict standards required in comparison to SPRAR, CAS ended up representing the fundamental pillar on which the Italian primary reception system is built. Even now, these centres lead primary reception, hosting around 136.000 asylum seekers compared with 25.000 forced migrants hosted in SPRAR (Ministry of Interior, 2018). Thus, a great part of the reception system in Italy is managed through an emergency approach. To the best of our knowledge, there are no public databases of CAS; however, reports showed many cases of inadequate structures and services, revealing that, for some of these centre managers, this is, first of all, a business opportunity (InCAStrati, 2016; Melchionda, 2016).

Since 2018, the Italian social and political situation has worsened with the adoption of an openly anti-immigrant policy adopted by the second to last government led by the right-wing party *Lega* and the populist and anti-establishment *Five Star Movement*. This has produced fewer landings through an inflexible policy of closure of the Italian ports as well as an increased atmosphere of hatred towards migrants (Dixon, Hawkins, Heijbroek, Juan-Torres, & Demoures, 2018). The last stage of such an intransigent policy was represented by the approval of the so-called "Security Decrees" (Decree-law no. 113 of 4 October, converted, with amendments, into Law no. 132 of 1 December 2018; Decree-law n.53 of 14 June converted, with amendments into Law no. 77 of 8 August 2019). The first "Security Decree", among other things, regulated various aspects of asylum claim procedures (e.g. it abolished the humanitarian protection, which was the status most commonly granted to asylum seekers in Italy and removed the right to appeal in cases of rejection of the asylum claim). Moreover, it also restructured the primary and secondary reception system (e.g. CAS are now officially primary reception centres, but there have been significant cuts to

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resources and services, including the teaching of the Italian language and the psychological support, whereas SPRAR network, re-named SIPROIMI, now deals only with unaccompanied minors and people who have been awarded international protection). In addition, the so-called “Security Decree *bis*” regulates the closure of the Italian ports to the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) which rescues migrants on the Mediterranean Sea, establishing severe penalties in case of disobedience.

In Italy, Campania, which is the region where we carried out the study, represents the first region of Southern Italy for the number of forced migrants (Giannetto, Ponzo, & Roman, 2019). Since 2016, despite the collaborative attitudes of the regional administration, Campania has faced several technical and organisational problems due to the excessive number of CAS that also led to demonstrations of local communities against municipalities and cooperatives engaged in refugee reception (Caponio & Cappiali, 2017).

## ***2.2 Participants and procedures***

The present study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the University of Naples Federico II and carried out in accordance with the last declaration of Helsinki. It was carried out at the end of 2017 in two male<sup>1</sup> CAS located in Campania Region which were contacted separately and informed of the study. Both agreed to take part in the research.

In a first collective meeting, the asylum seekers, who were able to speak English, were met at the Centres, informed of the aims of the study, and asked to express interest in participating. English was chosen because the interviewer’s level of English was good, thus facilitating comprehension of the speakers’ experiences. From a methodological point of view, we also needed to have the interviews in just one language in order to facilitate their analysis, avoiding any translations that might distort the sense attributed by participants to their experiences.

Participants were selected on the basis of the following inclusion criteria:

- being able to speak in English;
- being asylum seekers<sup>2</sup>.

Out of a total of 28 asylum seekers met, eight declared themselves unavailable to take part in the study. Thus, a total of 20 asylum seekers took part in the study. All participants were in the range age of 24-30 (M: 26.5, SD: 1.6) and arrived in Italy through the main route of the Central Mediterranean Sea from Libya from an average time of 3 months. All of them came from Sub-Saharan Africa: 4 from Ghana, 1 from Burkina Faso, 15 from Nigeria.

After the first meeting, a total of two individual meetings were held with each participant. During the first encounter, a consent form to take part in the research was given to each participant. Then, an in-depth interview was administered. During the second meeting, feedback about the research experience was given and received by participants.

Although both researcher and participants interacted in English, a male cultural consultant per center was also invited to each meeting. This cultural consultant was considered a friendly presence because the participants knew him from other activities at the centers; he also helped the

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<sup>1</sup> The research included only men because of the difficulty we experienced in finding women asylum-seekers to participate in the study. Doubtless, this raises wider and more complex questions about the need for practitioners to “get in touch” with this type of population (Tessitore & Margherita, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> According to UNHCR, persons who have sought international protection and whose requests for refugee status have not yet been decided.

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researcher with any language or cultural issues. He thus became a symbolic cultural bridge, and assumed a fundamental value as mediator during the transcultural encounter.

### 2.3 Instruments

An in-depth narrative interview aimed to explore pre-migratory, migratory and post-migratory experiences was developed with the following opening question: “*Would you like to tell me something about you...something about your experience...*”. A broad opening question was created in order to leave participants free to choose how to start. In this way we were able to follow their subjective narrative flow, deciding whether or not to explore some of the specific narrative passages in more depth depending on the participant. Interviews lasted an average of 35 minutes.

### 2.4 Data Analysis

The interviews, audio-recorded and transcribed *verbatim*, were analysed using the software T-Lab (Lancia, 2004). T-Lab is a quali-quantitative software for text analysis that, through the study of the vocabulary, identifies shared themes associated with the topic being researched (Bolasco, 1999). The software analyses the texts as a single set of data on which we carried out a preliminary treatment (Tab. 1).

**Table 1. Preliminary treatment of the text corpus**

|                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| Lemmatisation       | Forms of the verbs are brought back to their present infinitive forms, nouns and adjectives to their singular masculine form, articulated prepositions to their article-less form. |
| Disambiguation      | Operation by which ambiguous semantic cases are solved. Those cases which deal with homographs whose graphic form is the same but with a different meaning.                        |
| Lexicalisation      | Turn the unit into a string phrases consisting of two or three words that refer to a unitary meaning.  |
| Cleaning vocabulary | Words from empty or insignificant, such as abbreviations techniques, proper names, articles, conjunctions are deleted  |

During the pre-processing phase T-Lab computed a minimum frequency threshold to select words (or lemmas) for the automatic creation of the key-words list. Then, a specific thematic analysis was chosen: the Thematic Analysis of Elementary Context which allows to obtain and explore a representation of corpus content through few and significant thematic clusters. Specifically, cluster analysis is carried out by an unsupervised ascendant hierarchical method (Bisecting K-means algorithm)<sup>3</sup>, characterised by the co-occurrence of semantic features<sup>4</sup>. Each cluster consists of a set of elementary contexts (also termed e.c.u.) which are sentences, paragraphs

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<sup>3</sup> The cluster number is determined by an algorithm which uses the relationship between inter-cluster variance and it takes as optimal partition the one in which this relationship exceeds the threshold of 50%

<sup>4</sup> The occurrence threshold for the analyses was set at 4, ruling out all the lemmas which appeared less than 4 times in the corpus.

or short texts characterised by the same patterns of keywords identified by the software and is described through the lexical units (i.e. words, lemmas) most characteristic of the context units from which it is composed that are ranked by the software according to the decreasing value of  $\chi^2$ . Therefore, the Thematic Analysis of Elementary Context identifies the interviewees' lexical choices of a specific elementary context and carries out on them co-occurrence and comparative analysis. The resultant significant thematic clusters should be considered as contextual fields of meanings, "lexical worlds" (Reinert, 1995) shared by participants. Finally, a label could be assigned by the researcher to each cluster according to the theme which can be inferred from it.

### 3. Results

First of all, as mentioned above, the interviews lasted an average of 35 minutes. Their analysis produced a total of four thematic clusters. After naming each cluster, the most significant lemmas were identified for each, according to the decreasing value of  $\chi^2$  (Tab. 2). Clusters will be presented using the ascending hierarchical classification starting with those that are statistically significant (threshold level  $p = .05$ ). The principal lemmas will be reported in italics below and the values put in brackets indicate the percentage of e.c.u. that belong to each cluster. The interview extracts will also be reported in italics and for each of them ID, age and the country of origin will be indicated.

**Table 2. Clusters and lemmas**

| <b>% e.c.u.</b>               | <b>Label</b>                                      | <b>Principal lemmas sorted by weighed descending order <math>\chi^2</math></b>   |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Cluster 1<br/>(29.29%)</b> | <i>Not a human place</i>                          | <i>Libya (59.20); place (20.59); attack (20.59); hit (18.66); war (18); dangerous (17.90); wait (11.78); decide (9.18); leave (8.99).</i>  |
| <b>Cluster 2<br/>(28.21%)</b> | <i>Crossing the dark of the Mediterranean Sea</i> | <i>die (46.98); rescue (41.49); water (34.08); hours (34.08); time (32.78); Sicily (31.44); saved (25.58); people (22.92); afraid (18.12); happy (17.32); boat (16.13).</i>      |
| <b>Cluster 3<br/>(23.57%)</b> | <i>When everything started</i>                    | <i>father (100.10); mother (70.3); grandmother (63.83); Africa (60.00); sister (58.43); grow up (29.93); life (28.37); dead (26.32).</i>   |
| <b>Cluster 4<br/>(18.93%)</b> | <i>Land of care seeking</i>                       | <i>help (89); camp (50.11); pocket money (49.85); work (43.49); support (34.19); pay (33.21); boss (33.2); document (23.912); ok (19.72); freedom (11.35); problem (11.347).</i> |

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*Cluster 1. Not a human place*

The first cluster, *Not a human place* (29.29%), described the violence and human rights violation that all participants experienced in *Libya (place)*. As will be shown by the excerpts reported below, participants spoke about their migration process using a descriptive style mainly characterised by a lack of reference to emotional and affective states. The use of concrete words to narrate their stories to the researcher can likely be attributed to the traumatic valence of the experiences lived. In this cluster, lemmas like *war* and *dangerous* were used to talk about the Libyan socio-political instability as well as the risk of discrimination and violence that all Black migrants are exposed to. By virtue of these aspects, after the initial hopes (*wait*) to be able to work and live there, all participants defined this place only as a land of passage (*decide, leave*):

*I tried to work in Libya, I tried to spend time there but I found out that Libya is not a human place. It is dangerous, they could kill everybody in anytime.* [Speaker 7, 28, Nigeria]

*Libya is not a place where you can live in peace. Everyday bomb, shut...As black men we are discriminated from Arab men...it is a living hell.* [Speaker 20, 30, Ghana]

Lemmas like *hit* and *attack* also recalled the concrete events of violence mainly lived in the Libyan detention camps, where migrants are usually imprisoned only for being undocumented.

*I was imprisoned in Saba. Many of us took infections because there were no hygienic conditions. Libyan people hit me and forced me to work every day without payment. Then...small small bread... I saw terrible things.* [Speaker 2, 26, Burkina Faso]

*Torture...yeah...African men are imprisoned...before and also while waiting for the boat...suddenly they arrive and hit people...they attacked us...then...no food...no water...nothing.* [Speaker 10, 27, Nigeria]

Testifying the experiences of extreme traumatising (e.g. torture and beating) and denial of basic needs that many African migrants experience in Libya while waiting and hoping for a new life, *Not a human place* emerged as a sort of documentary and witness cluster. Through this cluster, participants reported a complex set of experiences which clearly transmitted the sense of something whose consequences go well beyond a simple psychic breaking. Narrative extracts, in fact, also showed the social and relational nature of trauma, perpetrated in the context of so-called human-made disasters, i.e. the atrocities that one human being is capable of doing to another. In this sense, through this cluster, participants also recounted the *dehumanisation* (Fédida, 2007) that African migrants are subjected to in Libyan detention camps, intended as the act of reducing the migrants to the status of object. These actions, such as senseless beating, work exploitation and denial of basic needs and hygiene constitute a profound violation of personal integrity and dignity and undermine the moral basis of human relatedness and community (Kirmayer, Kienzler, Afana, & Pedersen, 2010).



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## Cluster 2. Crossing the dark of the Mediterranean Sea

*Crossing the dark of the Mediterranean Sea* (28.21%) described the experience of crossing the Mediterranean Sea (*boat, water*) and of the arrival in *Sicily* which was common to all forced migrants entering Italy. The precise mention of hours spent on the Mediterranean made narratives in this cluster more specific than the previous ones. The mention of some affective states connected to the suspended time, and uncertainty lived on the boat, also emerged. Thematically, lemmas like *hours* and *time* were used to describe a time which seemed endless, marked by feelings of fear and hopelessness (*afraid, die*):

*Oh on the boat I was tired...the weather was no good, our engine was broken. We spent 9 or 10 hours on the boat. No food, no water...we drank salty water...* [Speaker 5, 29, Nigeria]

*On the Mediterranean Sea I spent 12 hours...I was afraid...we did not see nothing for many time...I thought I could die...many people died.* [Speaker, 4, 25, Ghana]

On the other hand, lemmas like *saved, rescue, happy* testified a time of hope and trust connected to the rescue operations carried out by the non-governmental organisations working in the Mediterranean:

*When I saw the rescue ship, I thanked God. They gave us food, drinks, clothes...next morning we arrived in Sicily* [Speaker 12, 26, Nigeria]

*When rescue people saved us, I cried a lot...because I was happy, very happy.* [Speaker 16, 25, Nigeria]

This is the cluster that talked about the second step in the participants' migration process, the one of the survival after a perilous journey in the pursuit of a better life. Here, a dilated time of fear, in which participants experienced a concrete sensation of suspension between life and death, which was accompanied by a time of happiness and new hope which emerged through the description of the feelings perceived when the NGOs rescued them.

## Cluster 3. When everything started

*When everything started* (23.57%) included the pre-migratory experiences lived by participants. Although participants mentioned different significant and primary relationships (*father, mother, sister, grandmother*), they did not anchor these to stories of past memories and experiences in their countries of origin. In other words, significant and primary relationships were mainly mentioned to describe the reasons why participants left their motherland (*growing up, Africa*), but were not deeply explored on their own. In this light, this cluster may suggest how difficult it is for participants to talk about their past memories, and to connect their experience of migration to their life before it (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989).

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*Life in Africa is very difficult because normally you have no money. Political, religious or terroristic groups could decide to kill you and you can only run away. [Speaker 2, 26, Burkina Faso]*

*My uncle killed my father and my brother...I was the next...he wanted our lands...if I wanted to live, I had no choice...I paid to leave. [Speaker 17, 27, Nigeria]*

*Boko Haram...a terroristic group...they wanted me. If they want someone and you don't want, you have to flee...I told my mum that I needed to go [Speaker 18, 30, Ghana]*

Religious, terrorist, political as well as community persecutions were mentioned as the main situations which forced participants to flee, with reference to the Boko Haram or cult groups' activities in Nigeria, or political oppression due to the denial of free political expression in Burkina Faso, community and family clashes due to hereditary issues in Ghana. The description of the forced nature of migration emerged with reference to situations that are fundamentally distant from a European culture, and that recall ancient and primitive dimensions in some way, with their references to the struggle for survival and the dualism between *life* and *death*.

#### *Cluster 4. Land of care seeking*

*Land of care seeking* (18.93%) described the participants' post-migratory experience and feeling towards the Italian Reception Centres in which they were hosted. Once again, this cluster is characterised by descriptive narratives and by the use of concrete words which shed light on the potential traumatic valence of this migratory phase. Lemmas like *ok*, *help* and *support* emerged, testifying the material and economic support (*pocket money*<sup>5</sup>) our participants received from the Centres:

*This camp helps me a lot...without the camp I don't know how to survive. Especially pocket money helps me... [Speaker 1, 25, Nigeria]*

*Yeah...I am fine in the camp, the bosses are ok, they help me...I have home, food, money...I feel safe here. [Speaker 7, 26, Nigeria]*

Beside this type of concrete support, a wide area of negative perceptions and concerns were reported with regard to the centre managers and their uncaring attitude, the absence of information about their asylum procedures, the slowness of the asylum system and the unemployment conditions (*problem*, *document*, *work*). These hindrances had a great impact on our participants' experience. More specifically, they generated a sense of feeling useless and of wasting time, that also led to feelings of worry, uncertainty and boredom:

*What really disturbs me is that I can't work. If you work without documents, you could have problems...but times for documents are too long [Speaker 13, 25, Nigeria]*

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<sup>5</sup> It indicates the amount of money they received monthly from the Centres.

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*Bosses do not come here...they considered us as things not as human beings...we are all human beings...they paid us late, the food is no good...I just want my document...how many time I have to wait...they said us we have to wait...how many time? I am tired...I can't work.* [Speaker 14, 28, Nigeria]

Overall, *Land of care seeking* captured the ambivalent representation of participants' post-migratory experiences in which an idealised view of Italy seemed to be strongly intertwined with a range of experience and episodes that, acting as *daily micro-traumatism*s (Risso & Boeker, 1992), threatened their already vulnerabilised identity. In our participants' narratives, the Italian Government, which finds its concrete expression in the Centres, was perceived as a source of material and economic support, which was guaranteed through the pocket money and the satisfaction of asylum seekers' primary needs (e.g. food, accommodation). Doubtless, all these aspects represented the first and necessary conditions to guarantee the right to life to these people, while also acting as protective factors for their well-being. However, on the other hand, the presence of lemmas like *camp* and *bosses* emerged as polysemous words testifying the way in which the Italian primary reception system could underpin and nourish the process of fragilization of asylum seekers' identities. In fact, the Centres were represented by our participants as "camps", which symbolically recall in our memory the horrors of "other camps"; while the managers were defined as "bosses" to whom people are normally subject. From our point of view, the different concerns and uncertainties mentioned by our participants represented an area of very high risk for health and well-being, because they threaten the idea of being someone and perpetrate, albeit differently, the experience of *dehumanisation* (Fédida, 2007) previously lived. In conclusion, this cluster was the one that revealed the contextual and socio-political nature of trauma the most. In particular, it shed light on the structural dynamics of asylum seekers' reception centres which, similarly to what has been observed in detention sites (Esposito, Ornelas, Briozzo, & Arcidiacono, 2019; Esposito, Ornelas, Scirocchi, & Arcidiacono, 2019; Kellezi, Bowe, Wakefield, McNamara, & Bosworth, 2019; Cleveland, Kronick, Gros, & Rousseau, 2018; Esposito, Ornelas, & Arcidiacono, 2015) ultimately end up prolonging asylum seekers' uncertainties and thus serving as a means to control and dominate them. From participants' narratives, the "land of care" that they were searching for emerged as a culture in which the "care" is denied through dynamics of asymmetric power, and any representation of the Other is flattened in the categories of "refugee", "fragile", "seeker" and, therefore, "victim".

#### 4. Discussion

Now more than ever, migration has to be considered as a political, social, psychological and humanitarian priority that requires researchers and practitioners to adopt a complex interdisciplinary approach to really understand people's experiences and design strategies to address and take care of their well-being and safeguard their rights. Integrating a psychodynamic perspective with the insights provided by community psychology, we argued the importance for researchers and practitioners in the field of forced migration to have an in-depth understanding of the symbolic and emotional universe of asylum seekers' experiences, placing it into a specific socio-political and cultural context and understanding it within a wider framework which takes *identity-otherness dynamics* (Mannarini & Salvatore, 2019) into consideration.

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Each cluster reflecting the core narrative of the participants' experiences (*When everything started, Not a human place, Crossing the dark of the Mediterranean Sea and Land of care seeking*) spoke about the close link between the intra-psychic, relational, socio-political and contextual nature of trauma. Through the exploration of the pre-migratory, migratory and post-migratory experiences of 20 asylum seekers, our analysis showed that what is called 'trauma' is actually the outcome of a traumatic field of experiences lived across different times and spaces. In doing so, our analysis highlighted the complex and multidimensional character of asylum seekers' trauma. In particular, and in addition to the human rights violation and identity challenges lived in their countries of origin and during their migratory journeys, our participants' narratives testified the traumatic nature of their post-migratory experiences and, more specifically, in the context of their reception centres, which exacerbated their suffering and heightened their vulnerability. In this sense, we need to consider that the arrival in Italy represented a delicate period because it marked the transition to a new identity for participants: from displaced people to asylum seekers. However, even though the status of asylum seeker provided our participants with a social-judicial label, it symbolically also prolonged the sense of suspension characterising their experience of displacement, while also projecting on them the ambiguous condition of *threshold people* (Turner, 1969) - meaning people who are neither here nor there, outside the network of classifications that normally locate something/someone in a cultural space.

In this fragile situation, the policies of the host countries, the attitudes of the hosting communities and reception centres, as well as how the asylum procedure is actually carried out and how long it takes to get international protection, all have a fundamental role in supporting or weakening migrants' identities and experiences (Tessitore, Glovi, & Margherita 2019; Beiser & Hou, 2017). These aspects are even more important if we consider that, during the post-migration phase, asylum seekers deal with a path aimed to reconquer an identity lost due to the experience of removal and, in many cases, denied due to the experience of the inhumanity which asylum seekers experience at different levels (e.g., individual, relational, institutional). However, these experiences of loss and transition are rarely accounted for in policies of support which focus on fulfilling basic needs such as accommodation, food and judicial status, confirming the need to commit for the promotion of direct changes within the social structure of hosting societies (Paloma, García-Ramírez, Camacho, & Olmedo, 2016).

Results testified the importance of exploring in depth the asylum seekers' experiences not only in order to understand their needs, amplifying their voices and subjectivities, but also to engage in reflection on the structural dynamics of hospitality policies and their consequences. We strongly believe that there is a need to train, sensitise and specialise professionals and communities to work and share experiences with forced migrants as a group so that, instead of being potentially traumatised, marginalised and vulnerabilised because of dehumanising behaviours or exclusion from normal rights on the part of host societies, migrants can be recognised as able to use and share their resources at the service of the social capital (Turcotte & Silka, 2007). This is particularly important if we are to go beyond the idea of safe containers and create welcoming and resilient spaces and communities where asylum seekers' social and cultural identities as well as experiences can start to be recognised and reorganised. Unfortunately, the latest measures adopted by the Italian government, with the approval of the "Security Decrees" and, in particular, the abolition of psychologists in the Reception Centres, put forced migrants' well-being at further risk. In doing so, these measures exacerbate asylum seekers' suffering while also increasing the social tensions between migrants and non-migrants (Salvatore et al., 2018; Varvin, 2017). Furthermore, they criminalise any act of solidarity and humanitarian assistance taking place in the Mediterranean,

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raising serious concerns for asylum seekers' right to life (Carrera, Sanchez, Vosyliute, Smialowski, & Allsopp, 2018). As psychologists concerned with well-being and social justice we should take a stance against this situation and defend the links between human rights, diversity and mental health.

Finally, some reflections need to be outlined regarding the second aim of the study, that of exploring strengths and weaknesses of using narrative methods with asylum seekers. We reflected on these points starting from the words that participants used, the way in which they organised their narratives as well as the feelings the first author perceived, as a researcher in the field of relationships. As mentioned above, participants' narratives were very brief, descriptive and lacking in reference to emotional states. The use of concrete words clearly reflected the traumatic valence of experiences they were called on to recount. From our point of view, these aspects were connected to two main issues: on the one hand, to the unavoidable links between trauma and its consequences on narration, such as the disruption of symbolisation and narrative meaning-making processes through which individuals usually give sense to their life events (Bohleber, 2007; Lysaker, Clements, Plascak-Hallberg, Knipscheer, & Wright, 2002). On the other hand, although, as clinicians, we recognise the positive impact the action to put traumatic and disruptive memories into a narrative form has for recovering from trauma, we also believe that in the context of forced migration, the narrative issue assumes a deep ambivalent function. During the asylum procedure, in fact, asylum seekers are normally called to recall, narrate and, where possible, prove the reasons why they fled from their motherland and, paradoxically, they will be evaluated on the basis of their capability to develop a coherent and organised narration of their escape memories. Similarly, they are asked to provide narratives as they integrate into new communities, accommodation centres and build relationships in the host country. Thus, issues around the narrative could have implications for help-seeking and help-giving and their ability to engage and adapt to new communities. Taking all these aspects into account, from our point of view the results suggested the need to create more appropriate interview situations which, through the combination of different linguistic and expressive registers, can facilitate, mediate and improve the narration of the asylum seekers' life story. More in general, we believe researchers and practitioners need to increase reflection on the use of narrative methods with this specific population, since it represents a very significant and challenging task. Recognising the value of qualitative research to maintain a holistic understanding of human subjects and its connections with social change (Stein & Mankowski, 2004), we stress the need to improve qualitative investigations starting from bottom-up and participatory approaches that take asylum seekers' needs and specificities into account and foster participation and commitment. Considering narratives as situated-narratives which promote a transformative process involving asylum seekers and researchers within a specific social and cultural context, these steps are extremely important to improve asylum seekers' well-being, mental health care and social services.

## **5. Limitation and future perspectives**

The present study is not free from limitations. Since the study focused only on men's experiences, we acknowledge the need, in future, to explore the perspectives of male, female and non-binary gendered asylum seekers in order to analyse gender specificities and needs. Through the present study we explored the asylum seekers' meanings and representations of migratory experiences and contexts of reception, however it could also be interesting to extend the investigation to the

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representations of professionals operating in reception sites (e.g. cultural consultants or social workers) to better understand the institutional dynamics which underpin Italian primary hospitality contexts. Finally, starting from what has been observed and identified about the “narrative issue”, with the hypothesis that an image-based language might be able to increase the narrative organisation of asylum seekers’ life experiences and meaning-making processes, we are working on the development of a new methodology, i.e., an image-mediated narrative interview method which combines in-depth interview questions with documentary photographs reflecting asylum seekers’ migratory experiences (Tessitore & Margherita, 2019). We believe that future research adopting this methodology might be able to produce meaningful insights. More widely, our study shows the importance to account for narrative complexities and challenges faced by asylum seekers and the implications this has for their ability to communicate, integrate and benefit from support available.

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