LIVES ON HOLD: THE EXPERIENCES OF ASYLUM SEEKERS IN MORIA REFUGEE CAMP

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Of the hundreds of thousands of people that formed the huge migratory flow of the so-called 'refugee crisis', many are currently living in refugee camps, at times without basic conditions. This research aims to describe the lived experience of these people and amplify their voices. In order to pursue this goal, we conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with asylum seekers accomodated in the Kara Tepe refugee camp but who had also had experience of life in Moria refugee camp (both camps are in Greece). We complemented these data with participant observations carried out in the Kara Tepe refugee camp and some visits at the surroundings of Moria camp. Our results highlight a much worse experience of asylum seekers in Moria refugee camp if compared to asylum seekers' experience in Kara Tepe, with reports of overcrowding, hunger, lack of hygiene, poor healthcare, insecurity and violence. The psychological impact of the high number of adversities affecting people living under these circunstances also stood out, with evidence of distress experienced. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings in terms of policy change.

Keywords*: asylum seekers, refugee camps, lived experiences, psychological impact, Moria, Greece*

1. Introduction

The year of 2015 was the peak of the so-called 'refugee crisis' in the EU, with thousands of people from Middle Eastern countries such as Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan arriving in Greece in search for asylum in Europe (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2017; Frontex, 2017). According to the UNHCR (2017), the main reasons that motivated people to abandon their countries in search for a sanctuary in Europe were the traumatic events they

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experienced in their countries of origin, including violent conflicts, persecutions, environmental degradation, food related difficulties and political instability, among other factors. A traumatic event is an occurrence whose impact exceeds the person's coping abilities as well as emotional and cognitive resources (Carlson & Dalenberg, 2000; Herman, 1992; McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Although traumatic events vary according to the context, the literature has highlighted common experiences among asylum seekers which include: multiple losses of family members, assets and properties; experiences of violence, torture, physical and verbal harassment; persecution for political, ethnic and/or religious reasons; insecurity due to military occupation; as well as economic difficulties, unemployment and lack of medical care (Arbeláez & Mulholland, 2016; Clarke & Borders, 2014; Goodman, Vesely, Letiecq, & Cleaveland, 2017; Khawaja, White, Schweitzer, & Greenslade, 2008).

The rights of asylum seekers are outlined in several legal frameworks. The legal framework for international protection in the EU is based on the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (UNHCR, 1951). Guidelines are also established through the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) in order to guarantee that asylum seekers receive the same treatment across EU countries, representing a step towards the harmonization of people's protection (Dimitriadi, 2016). Despite these common regulations, and though the number of people trying to cross the sea to Europe after 2015 has been decreasing (Frontex, 2019), there are still many asylum seekers in Europe living with no basic conditions while waiting for the outcome of their asylum applications (Tsoni, 2016). This situation has been worsened by the progressive focus on migration as a security issue and an enabler of illegal activity by terrorists and international criminal organizations (Afouxenidis, Petrou, Kandylis, Tramounstanis, & Giannaki, 2017). Refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants are indeed frequently portrayed as the 'dark side' of globalization and a 'safety threat' to be controlled through raising walls, patrols and detention centers (Lui, 2002).

According to this representation, the EU priorities started to focus on closing borders instead of paying attention to human rights (Afouxenidis et al., 2017). Since borders were closed, refugee camps in Europe, especially in the main arrival countries like Greece, have become a long-term and more frequent reality although they were designed as sites of temporary accommodation (Afouxenidis et al., 2017; Ramadan, 2012). Multiple reports came out about the poor living conditions experienced by people in refugee camps, with harsh criticism regarding infrastructures, overcrowding, and lack of comfort (Feldman, 2014). It has also been demonstrated that the multiple adversities and the precarious living conditions experienced by asylum seekers have serious consequences for their physical and mental health (Bogic, Njoku, & Priebe, 2015; Cleveland, Rousseau, & Kronick, 2012). The psychological impact of such experiences can even result, in extreme cases, in post-traumatic stress symptoms (Bogic et al., 2015; Cleveland et al., 2012; Elklit, Kjær, Lasgaard, & Palic, 2012; Strijk, van Meijel, & Gamel, 2010), as well as depression and anxiety (Bogic et al., 2015; Cleveland et al., 2012; Cummings, Sull, David, & Worley, 2011; Farhat et al., 2018).

Based on this evidence, the present study aims to describe the lived experiences of asylum seekers in Greek refugee camps and how these experiences affect their psychological wellbeing. In particular, we focused our attention on people living in the Kara Tepe refugee camp but who had also had experience of life in Moria refugee camp. In illuminating the perspectives and experiences of these actors, we wish to provide knowledge about these sites of containment and contribute to the debate on policy change in this area.

2. The research context: Greece

In 2016, the EU and Turkey signed an agreement to deal with the so-called 'refugee crisis'. According to this agreement, all asylum applications are individually evaluated in the EU and those considered 'unacceptable' or 'unfounded' are returned to Turkey, which must accept every person sent by the EU. Turkey also commits to preventing the opening of new routes in exchange for three billion Euros for the improvement of living conditions for Syrian refugees there (Afouxenidis et al., 2017; Dimitriadi, 2016). As a result, the number of undocumented migrations from the Middle East to Europe has dropped (Frontex, 2019). Several organizations have expressed their opposition to this agreement (Afouxenidis et al., 2017), including Amnesty International, which estimated that around three million asylum seekers and refugees are abandoned in Turkey without help or protection (Dimitriadi, 2016). Also, in 2016 some Balkan countries (Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia and Austria) closed their borders often using physical obstacles (Afouxenidis et al., 2017).

Greece is located between Europe, Asia and Africa and, due to its geographical location, used to be a gateway for thousands of people seeking international protection and a better life in Europe (Afouxenidis et al., 2017; Jauhiainen, 2017). Yet, the EU-Turkey agreement and the closure of the Balkan route transformed Greece from a passageway into a final destination: asylum seekers were left with no option but to ask Greece for protection. Furthermore, with the closure of the Balkan route that allowed migrants to reach Northern Europe, both continental Greece and the islands received a high number of arrivals, especially after the EU-Turkey agreement (Tsoni, 2016). Of all the Greek islands, Lesvos received the highest number of people. During several months, the number of asylum seekers matched the number of inhabitants (Afouxenidis et al., 2017). About half a million arrivals were registered in Lesvos, from a total of 860 000 through all the Greek islands (UNHCR, 2016). This touristic destination actually became a main entry for undocumented migration to Europe (Tsoni, 2016).

In 2017, 29,700 undocumented migrants arrived in Greece (UNHCR, 2018). Currently, despite the decrease in the number of arrivals in Greece, there are still great challenges in asylum seekers' reception and registration. Many asylum seekers are indeed not able to submit their claims due to lack of staff and limited access to information regarding the bureaucratic procedures to seek protection (Dimitriadi, 2016). Furthermore, poor living conditions were reported, mostly in refugee camps located in the Greek islands of Chios, Lesvos and Samos (UNHCR, 2018). In the face of this evidence, the UNHCR recommended the transfer of asylum seekers and refugees to the continental territory (UNHCR, 2018). Of the several refugee camps created in Lesvos in 2015, two main camps are currently still operating: Moria and Kara Tepe. When migrants arrive to the island, they are initially taken to Moria, where the bureaucratic procedures take place, such as identification, registration and submission of asylum applications. Later on, some families are transferred to Kara Tepe, where they wait for the assessment of their asylum claim, while other families as well as migrants traveling alone remain in Moria (Jauhiainen, 2017).

3. Method

This research aims to describe the experiences and perspectives of asylum seekers living in a refugee camp in Lesvos, Greece. At the time of the research, all the participants we interviewed were living in Kara Tepe refugee camp; however, they had also experienced life in Moria camp, which they often used as a comparator to Kara Tepe. In particular, we describe participants' perception of everyday life in these two refugee camps, their needs and the obstacles they faced; as well as the psychological impact of their life as precarious refugees. While presenting a general overview of life in both camps, our results will focus particularly on Moria camp given the particularly harsh living conditions experienced by asylum seekers in this site

3.1 Methodological approach

In this study, we adopted a qualitative approach to access participants' experiences and perceptions (Zeno, 2017). We used thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify common patterns across our participants' interviews in terms of aspects of life in the camps that created the strongest concerns and distress to them. The qualitative methodology is the most appropriate when little is known about a subject or phenomenon under study, and when the quality of experiences is likely to be very diverse. In particular, our thematic analysis was inductive aiming to bring and be guided by the perspectives of asylum seekers which are rarely heard. The aim of inductive thematic analysis is indeed to be guided by the data in terms of defining what the most important and common issues raised by the participants are (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.2 Participants

The participants for this study were selected through a purposive process (Fortin, 1999), using the following criteria: every participant had to be an asylum seeker residing in Kara Tepe refugee camp and with experience of life inside Moria refugee camp, given the focus of our research on the conditions of this site. Participants were approached by members of the research team, who explained the study and invited them to voluntarily participate. The group of participants was composed of three women and 12 men (M_{age} = 28, age range: 16-62 years old). In terms of nationality, eight participants were Syrian, four Iraqi and three Afghan. Regarding civil status and number of children, eight people were married and had one to five children; seven people were single without children.

Levels of education were also varied: five participants completed middle school, three had a college degree, one completed high school and the remaining did not provide this information. Only five participants mentioned their occupation: two were students, two were teachers and one was a plumber. Of the seven persons who specified their religion, four were practicing Muslims, one was a non-practicing Muslim, one was a non-practicing Christian and one was an atheist. Regarding the moment they left their home country, the period of time ranged from five months to 15 years and two participants did not answer. The duration of their stay in Greece varied between four months and two years, and two participants did not reveal this information. Lastly,

concerning the passage through other countries, every participant mentioned Turkey, three also referred Iran, one mentioned Syria, and another one Lebanon.

3.3 Data collection

The sociodemographic questionnaire we used included multiple choice and short answer questions, regarding: age, sex, nationality, civil status, number of children, level of education, occupation, religion, psychological support, healthcare problems and medication used, hiatus of time since leaving home country, hiatus of time since arriving in Greece and, if applicable, the passage through other countries in between.

A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant. The interview script was based on existing literature and formulated in order to address the research objectives. However, the interview also allowed the participants to discuss topics that were not initially included but that they felt were important. The topics addressed were: participants' perception of life in Kara Tepe and Moria camps, their needs and the obstacles they faced; their psychological well-being; the coping strategies they adopted; and their expectations for the future.

Permission to carry out the research was obtained by the manager of Kara Tepe refugee camp (Lesvos, Greece). To facilitate the data collection and analysis, the interviews were either conducted in English with participants who could speak this language, or in the presence of a translator who was a speaker of the interviewee's native language. The informed consent was verbally obtained from the participants after explaining the study's objectives and procedures, the steps taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, and the possibility to leave the research study at any time. Only two participants were under 18, so in these cases the informed consent was obtained from their parents. Permission was also asked to audio record the interviews in order to simplify the transcription and further analysis. The average duration of the interviews was 30 minutes.

To enrich and complement the data obtained through interviews, we resorted to observation for a period of 11 days in Kara Tepe refugee camp (September 16, 2018 – September 26, 2018). The observation was conducted without a previously built schedule of issues to focus on. This fieldwork provided us privileged access to multiple aspects of the interviewees' life: the camp structure and organization in terms of daily routines; the interviewees and other residents, as well as their routines and interaction dynamics; some activities conducted by volunteers with children, youths and adults; and the living conditions. Lastly, we visited the surroundings of Moria refugee camp and collected data regarding its infrastructures and the main differences to those of Kara Tepe. In Kara Tepe, we carried out participant-observations (involvement in shared activities) and not participant observations in which we generally observed everyday life while at times asking clarifying questions about what was being observed (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, & Lê, 2014; Murchison, 2010). In addition to descriptive field notes, the researcher's perceptions and feelings while in the field were collected and analyzed as data (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

In Kara Tepe, we felt very welcomed by everyone. On first acquaintance, adults and youths were usually shy, but nice and approachable. Children were very affectionate and adults smiled and said "*Hello, my friend*". People's kindness and children's joy were contagious. When asked to participate in this study, people were usually very receptive. Generally, everyone wanted to show the world they needed help and were surprised that their situation was not more prevalent

and given enough importance in the media. Most of the participants invited us into their lodgings to conduct the interviews and offered us tea, coffee, cigarettes and/or fruit. During the interviews, they usually seemed happy to share their story and have people interested in getting to know them. However, their accounts often contained distressing topics, which highlights the general status of anxiety they felt.

3.5 Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The data analysis began with a careful reading, capturing the words or expressions related to the participants' experiences. Given the exploratory nature of the study, we progressed by analyzing relevant segments of data generating codes, maintaining the participants' words. This was a phase of open coding progress through a constant comparative process. In order to strengthen the validity of our qualitative research, we used the consensus analysis once the data were analyzed, core issues selected and discussed by several members of the research team, until a consensus was reached (Hill et al., 2005). The analysis procedures were supported by the software package QSR- NVIVO 11, which facilitates the interactive process inherent to an inductive orientation.

4. Results

The following results are based on data analysis of the interviews and our observations. Firstly, we expose some data regarding Kara Tepe refugee camp, the people we met there and in Moria. Then we illustrate the main themes that we identified from the analysis of the interviews, which particularly concern the conditions in Moria camp and the participants' experiences in there, given the particularly harsh living conditions experienced by asylum seekers in this site. Finally, we discuss the psychological impact of these experiences.

4.1 Experience in the different transitional contexts

Divisions within the camps**.** Both in Kara Tepe and in Moria people with different nationalities and cultural backgrounds were forced to live together, a situation which sometimes caused conflicts. However, while our interviewees overtly expressed concerns about violence in Moria, in Kara Tepe we noticed that inter-group tension emerged from the families' distribution through the camp as well as from segregation in some activities (e.g. non-formal education sessions provided by NGOs), in which different cultures did not blend and interact easily. In terms of violence, aggressions were mentioned by 12 participants ("*There are fights all the time because of the food line, the tents… Everything! People are always under stress, so there are always fights*" – Syrian female, 34 years old), six participants talked about the conflicts between Arabs and Kurds ("*Arabs and Kurds started attacking families on both sides. The Arabs hit my 12-year-old son. The men created problems with the families. They attacked people and said they had to leave because they were Arab or Kurdish*" – Syrian female, 43 years old), and one reported health problems caused by inter-group violence ("*The Arabs attacked me and broke my*

head, my leg and my arm. They were 15 people hitting me with iron bars. The MSF [Doctors Without Borders] *called an ambulance because I had many broken bones*" – Syrian male, 24 years old).

Sense of safety and security**.** Conversely, Moria refugee camp was a very different environment. This was already evident from its structural layout: a facility which was a former military base surrounded by walls and barbed wire. While Kara Tepe residents, despite not being in an ideal situation, felt they were in a dignified and safe environment, which was free from violence, our interviewees drew our attention to the poor living conditions in Moria, particularly concerning the lack food and hygiene. Even before getting to the entrance of the camp, it was possible for us to observe the numerous tents in its surroundings. Even a very brief observation could establish that the camp was a very dirty place, with a lot of garbage on the ground. On the other side of the road, there was the Doctors Without Borders' workstation. According to some residents' testimony, they were working outside of the camp as a form of protesting against Moria's poor conditions. The police presence was notorious and illustrated the existing tension.

Most participants referred to Moria as an adverse environment. This negative representation of Moria became clear through one report of shock upon arrival ("*When I entered Moria, I was in shock. I was very confused because there were a lot of people and I had never seen conditions like that*" – Afghan male, 23 years old), as well as eight noteworthy negative descriptions of life in there ("*It was very hard. I feel like we were psychologically tortured there*" – Afghan male, 62 years old). In this sense, comparisons between the camp and the participants' home countries were presented, with three participants mentioning similarities ("*It was like Syria. We are in a European country, but it's like being in Syria. Violence, hate…*" – Syrian male, 29 years old) and one saying that Moria was even worse that her origin country ("*Life there was worse than in Kobani*" – Syrian female, 32 years old). People's expectations and desire for safety and a better life were crashed by their current living conditions.

Regarding the lack of support, absence of organizations was mentioned by one participant ("*There was no one from UNHCR or other organizations assisting people*" – Syrian male, 24 years old), and the lack of police protection by four participants ("*One time, someone got into our isobox and attacked my father. He went to the police and they just said 'This is Moria'*" – Iraqi male, 16 years old). Two participants also emphasized the sense of insecurity they overall felt inside the camp ("*It wasn't a safe space. We didn't feel safe there*" – Syrian male, 24 years old).

During our stay in Kara Tepe, we engaged in informal conversations with some residents between the interviews. In some of these conversations, we discussed other relevant issues that had not come up in the interviews. Regarding violence, there seemed to be a habituation effect. One young adult said: "*For us, war and violence are normal. It's as normal as smoking a cigarette*" (Iraqi male, 22 years old), showing how the reiterated exposure to violence led to its trivialization. Another topic that was mentioned by many residents was the processing of asylum applications as a reason for concern. The way authorities managed asylum claims was often perceived as inadequate and several people highlighted the lack of information provided regarding the steps to seek asylum. One resident also mentioned that the asylum interviews seemed to be merely a bureaucratic procedure, instead of a moment to discuss one's own case and report their lived experience. Conversely, and in spite of all the suffering, frustration and uncertainty, people tended to show more hope and optimism regarding their future while living in Kara Tepe as opposed to when they were in Moria.

Living conditions. In agreement with their general representation of the camp, participants identified specific negative aspects of life in Moria, mainly in terms of housing conditions, hygiene, food, healthcare and formal sources of support. Regarding overcrowding, two participants mentioned an excessive number of people ("*It is very overcrowded. There are a lot of people there and still a lot coming*" – Afghan male, 23 years old), three talked about the tents ("*They gave me a very small tent. We were five people. We couldn't even stand up inside the tent*" – Syrian female, 34 years old), and five about the need to share space with many people ("*We lived in a tent with a lot of people. We had sheets separating our bedrooms from the other families*" – Syrian male, 31 years old).

On the topic of food, four participants talked about the long waiting period to get food ("*We wait in line for food for an hour, an hour and a half, two hours… Just to get food*" – Syrian female, 43 years old), one mentioned the fact that the food was insufficient in terms of quantity ("*We didn't have food, we didn't have water… We were always starving*" – Iraqi male, 16 years old), and five presented a negative perception of the food quality ("*The food quality was not good enough for children growing up. There's not enough nutrition for people to grow up in a healthy way*" – Iraqi male, 20 years old).

Concerning hygiene issues, three participants talked about the lack of basic sanitary conditions ("*We went to the United Nations several times to say that we were in a very complicated situation, without water, sanitation or showers*" – Afghan male, 23 years old), and four complained that the camp was extremely dirty ("*There was water coming out of the toilets and into our tent. It was a very dirty place*" – Syrian male, 31 years old).

As negative aspects, four participants also mentioned the cold, which further contributed to their concerns and distress ("*In the winter, it was very hard to live in a tent. Every day I had an ice wall outside my tent. I had to break it in order to get out*" – Iraqi male, 20 years old), and three mentioned the sleeping conditions, such as the absence of beds, as well as the cold, and loud noises ("*I didn't sleep for a very long time. I couldn't sleep. I only slept one or two hours*" – Afghan male, 17 years old).

Research with asylum seekers in Greece supports the opinion of one participant who stated that staying for several months in such challenging conditions is one of the reasons for people wanting to go back to their home countries (Jauhiainen, 2017; Schneider, Shraiky, Wofford, & Awad, 2017) (*"The asylum process is very slow in this country. (…) They may even lose hope and faith and want to go back to their countries. They may start to think 'I'd rather go back and die with dignity than stay here and be humiliated'"* – Iraqi male, 20 years old),

Psychological and physical distress. The reports of negative life events and their psychological impact were very common. Many participants reported the traumatic experiences they lived in their countries of origin or during their migratory journey. Regarding adverse experiences in the country of origin, 15 participants mentioned exposure to violence ("*Since I was a child until now, I see fights every day, so this is normal for me*" – H14), 12 talked about the war ("*I saw a lot of people dying in explosions and shootings. I saw it with my own eyes*" – H14), three mentioned terrorism ("*In Syria, because I was smoking a cigarette, the ISIS soldiers cut my finger*" – HVM), two described discrimination ("*The Iranian government didn't give me ID. They mistreated us. They threatened us saying they would arrest us. They assaulted Afghans, provoked us, didn't give us jobs*" – H15), three mentioned death threats ("T*he Al-Qaeda soldiers told my father 'If you don't come, we kill you*'" – H13), and one described the loss of family members due to armed conflicts ("*After the war, many people from my family died*" – H4).

Regarding adverse experiences during their journey, in turn, five participants talked about shipwrecks ("*When we were coming, the boat hit a big rock at sea. Everybody fell to the water and we stayed there for two hours until the Greek police rescued us*" – H12), and seven mentioned the separation from their family members ("T*here are a lot of things I would like to say to my father but I can't say it over the phone and I'll never see him again*" – H20C).

In terms of the impact of these adverse experiences at the time of the interview, three participants reported sadness *("We are hurt for everything we've been through"* – Afghan male, 62 years old), seven mentioned fear (*"Everybody was in stress, everybody was scared. We were very frightened"* – Afghan male, 17 years old), two insomnia (*"We couldn't go to sleep"* – Syrian female, 34 years old), five uncertainty regarding the future (*"Now, my life isn't very good because I don't know what will happen in the future. I've been in camps in Lesvos for two years, so now I'm worried about my future"* – Afghan male, 23 years old), one talked about the risk of depression and anxiety (*"The asylum process is very slow in this country. This may cause depression and anxiety to people. They may even lose hope and faith and want to go back to their countries. They may start to think 'I'd rather go back and die with dignity than stay here and be humiliated'"* – Iraqi male, 20 years old), and two described a traumatic impact (*"For 15 days, I was in shock. I had phobia because of Moria. Every time someone talked about Moria, I was scared because what we saw there was very bad"* – Syrian female, 31 years old). In particular, one woman who was going to be transferred to Athens with her family mentioned she did not know what her future was going to be like, or what awaited them in the Greek capital *("We are going to Athens but we don't know where we're going or what will happen"* – Syrian female, 31 years old).

In terms of support, two participants mentioned insufficiency of on-site medical care ("*There is a lack of medical support. People have health issues they cannot cure because they don't have the necessary treatment and medication*" – Iraqi male, 20 years old), seven mentioned health problems related to the camp's poor living conditions ("*My kids caught allergies and diseases because it isn't a clean place*" – Syrian female, 43 years old), and one talked about the new-arrivals section describing it as a very dirty place where people easily got sick ("*It was a very big tent with 300 or 400 people. Everybody got sick there because it was very dirty. It was very bad*" – Afghan male, 17 years old). Roughly half of our participants mentioned health problems during their permanence in Moria and complained about the limited access to health care, as well as the precarious medical support (see also Schneider et al., 2017).

5. Discussion

Refugee camps are designed as a temporary space to offer protection and humanitarian support. However, in practice, they may become almost a long-term reality for many individuals and families who remain 'entrapped' there for an indefinite period of time while awaiting the assessment of their asylum claims (Hermans et al., 2017; Ramadan, 2012; Turner, 2015). Indeed, as highlighted elsewhere, asylum seekers often spend months in refugee camps (Jauhiainen, 2017). These places are, however, far from adequate for those who have experienced multiple distressing events even prior to arriving in the camps.

Regarding life in Moria, we found multiple negative evidences. Previous studies conducted in Moria (e.g., Hermans et al., 2017; Jauhiainen, 2017; Kalir & Rosakou, 2016; Schneider et al.,

2017) show similar situations to the ones reported by the participants of this research, such as overcrowding, cold, the use of tents and sharing space with several people, inadequate sanitation and hygiene conditions, as well as limited access to healthcare, poor quality and limited food. Furthermore, food scarcity and the long waiting lines are identified as the main reasons for conflicts and aggressions among residents (Hermans et al., 2017; Jauhiainen, 2017; Kalir & Rosakou, 2016). In other words, these poor living conditions are not conductive to the formation of a sense of community among asylum seekers and of the potential social capital that can derive from that community (Kellezi et al., 2019).

Like in the descriptions of Moria shared by our participants, overcrowding and lack of space are often found in other refugee camps (Feldman, 2014; Hershey et al., 2011; Ramadan, 2012; Schneider et al., 2017; Sossou et al., 2008). Consequently, accommodation conditions are not adequate, do not protect from the cold and do not allow for the needed rest (Hershey et al., 2011; Kalir & Rozakou, 2016; Schneider et al., 2017). Just like in Moria, overcrowding makes some camps spread beyond their limits, becoming spaces with indefinite borders instead of well-delimited camps (Feldman, 2014). Concerning hygiene, the participants described a lack of conditions to fulfill their basic routines. Several studies present similar criticisms, highlighting insufficiency of drinking water and sanitation failures (Cronin et al., 2008; Hershey et al., 2011; Schneider et al., 2017). Additionally, the dirtiness and garbage buildup reported by our participants are also found in other camps (Ramadan, 2012; Schneider et al., 2017). Our study also shows that poor hygiene conditions, inadequate food and overcrowding are detrimental to people's health and wellbeing (Cronin et al., 2008) and contribute to the increased risk of pandemics in these sites (Hermans et al., 2017; Hershey et al., 2011; Schneider et al., 2017).

Violence in Moria was a topic mentioned by most participants, which is also well-documented in previous literature (e.g., Farhat et al., 2018; Goodman et al., 2017). Although refugee camps are created as spaces of safety and protection (Bulley, 2014; Ramadan, 2012), violence and aggressions often occur, especially between people with different nationalities and cultural and religious backgrounds (Farhat et al., 2018; Goodman et al., 2017; Schneider et al., 2017). Notably in our study one participant suggested that precarious living conditions, which cause stress, may be the main reason for people to engage in inter-group aggressions. Other studies support this idea, pointing to overcrowding and inadequate feeding as some of the reasons for conflicts (Schneider et al., 2017). Roughly one fourth of the participants mentioned lack of police support and negligence. This behavior by the authorities in refugee camps was also highlighted in previous studies (Schneider et al., 2017).

Research about the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees shows a wide range of adverse events experienced in their home country and during their journey. However, adversity often remains in the transitional context in which, as demonstrated by our findings, many asylum seekers live with limited resources and without privacy or basic conditions (Goodman et al., 2017; Sossou et al., 2008). The adverse experiences most often narrated by the participants are also mentioned in other studies carried pout with this population, and include: violence (Clarke & Borders, 2014; Cleveland et al., 2012; Gladden, 2012; Goodman et al., 2017; Jauhiainen, 2017; Khawaja et al., 2008), war (Gladden, 2012; Goodman et al., 2017; Khawaja et al., 2008; Schneider et al., 2017), and separation or loss of family members (Clarke & Borders, 2014; Cleveland et al., 2012; Gladden, 2012; Jauhiainen, 2017; Khawaja et al., 2008; Savic, Chur-Hansen, Mahmood, & Moore, 2013). Less often, research also addresses the other potentially traumatic life events mentioned by the participants, such as shipwreck (Jauhiainen, 2017), terrorism (Schneider et al., 2017), death threat (Cleveland et al., 2012; Khawaja et al., 2008) and

discrimination (Gladden, 2012). Several studies conducted in Lesvos show the serious health issues found in asylum seekers (e.g., Hermans et al., 2017; Kousoulis, Ioakeim-Ioannidou, & Economopoulos, 2016). In physical terms, they report high levels of respiratory tract infections, diarrhea and infectious diseases, such as scabies and chickenpox. They also state that some mothers are under such stress that they are not able to breastfeed their babies. Despite the need for psychological care, one study says that there are only two psychologists in Moria who dedicate most of their time to vulnerability screenings, thus not having enough time to offer adequate psychological support (Hermans et al., 2017).

Among the main mental health issues found in this population are post-traumatic stress symptoms (Bogic et al., 2015; Cleveland et al., 2012; Elklit et al., 2012; Strijk et al., 2010), as well as depression and anxiety symptoms (Bogic et al., 2015; Cleveland et al., 2012; Cummings et al., 2011; Farhat et al., 2018). Some of the symptoms of these conditions were often reported as concerns by the participants, such as fear, sadness and insomnia. Research shows reports of similar symptoms among this population: fear and insecurity, typically found in anxiety and post-traumatic stress (Erdener, 2017; Jauhiainen, 2017; Khawaja, White, Schweitzer, & Greenslade, 2008; Schneider et al., 2017; Strijk et al., 2010); feelings of sadness and hopelessness, traditional depression symptoms (Cleveland et al., 2012; Schneider et al., 2017); as well as nightmares and changes in sleep patterns, found in all three conditions (Brekke, 2010; Cleveland et al., 2012; Erdener, 2017; Strijk et al., 2010).

Uncertainty regarding the future was mentioned by one third of our sample and is also a much-explored issue in previous studies with asylum seekers and people held in immigration detention sites (e.g., Biehl, 2015; Brekke, 2010; Farhat et al., 2018; Griffiths, 2013, 2014; Jauhiainen, 2017; Khawaja et al., 2008; Schneider et al., 2017). In addition to the uncertainty related to the outcome of their asylum applications, asylum seekers have to deal with the uncertainty regarding the time they have to wait inside the camp or the detention center they are confined into. Therefore, time turns out to be a crucial element in the experiences of this population (Griffiths, 2013; Griffiths, 2014). Besides the seemingly endless wait, change can be sudden and dramatic, which also contributes to feelings of uncertainty and a sense of time in which little can be foreseen (Griffiths, 2013). Thus, asylum seekers, who are often torn between the anticipation of disruptive changes to come and the fear of indefinite stagnation (Esposito, Ornelas, Briozzo, & Arcidiacono, 2019; Griffiths, 2014), face a daily struggle to preserve a sense of self and meaning for their live. This evidence also emerged by the narratives of the asylum seekers we interviewed in the Kara Tepe refugee camp and seemed to affect their ability to cope. Additionally, many participants claimed that the order in which their asylum applications were processed seemed to be random, a condition which exacerbated their feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty (Brekke, 2010).

Strengths and limitations**.** The fact that the interviews were conducted in English might have limited the ability of the participants to fully express their concerns and experiences, which is a limitation for our study. However, the language barriers are a common concern in the camps life, so our study was able to observe real life experiences and interactions. The interviews for the asylum application and the apparent arbitrariness of the processing order were a central concern for some participants. Thus, it would be important to understand how these interviews are conducted and whether they are adequately conducted, avoiding secondary victimization and adopting a comprehensive lens, instead of a hostile and suspicious attitude. Given its centrality and being a major stress source, the impact of the asylum requests processing on the applicants' mental health should also a pertinent topic for future research.

6. Conclusions

This research aimed to describe the experience of asylum seekers at a time of transition in a refugee camp while waiting for their case to be decided. Supporting previous work, we highlighted the harsh living conditions experienced by asylum seekers in refugee camps, namely inadequate food, overcrowding, lack of hygiene conditions, violence and poor physical and mental health. The conditions in which asylum seekers live can be very damaging to their wellbeing and mental health. Therefore, to answer this population's needs, it is crucial that European countries work together to significantly shorten the transitional period, speeding up the procedures for the adjudication of asylum claims and the concession of the related rights while at the same time improving accommodation conditions in refugee camps.

In particular, health, hygiene and feeding need urgent improvements. Better living conditions will also help people improve their health and wellbeing. Therefore, better sanitation and hygiene conditions, as well as more adequate meals in terms of quality and quantity are imperative demands. In order to meet these needs, the number of residents inside the camps should be drastically reduced and overcrowding should end. This would require fundamental changes in current European asylum policies in order to speed up the processing of asylum applications and promote a fair and adequate share of responsibilities between European member-states.

Improvement of medical and psychological care in this context is also crucial, taking into account this population's vulnerability, the several traumatic experiences they suffered, the excessive exposure to violence and the psychological distress they report. In particular, psychological care should focus on supporting asylum seekers to develop adequate coping strategies as well as on helping them to develop their resiliencies and positive narratives about themselves. Furthermore, in order to reduce their feeling of wasted time and constant dwelling on the future, activities should be promoted in these sites, not only for children and youths but also for adult people and the elderlies. These activities may include informal education, volunteer work, practical skills workshops, cultural and religious events, mutual help groups. All improvements relating to building resilience and meaningful activity in refugee camps could contribute to building communities, shared sources of support and social capital in such a difficult time. However, issues relating to safety and asylum process require fundamental changes at European and State level.

Overall, our research shows how the adversities faced by asylum seekers in transitional contexts exacerbate their vulnerability and expose them to a serious risk for their wellbeing and mental health. In these contexts, people – using the words of one of our interviewees – feel their 'lives (being) on hold'. The lack of information related to the process of seeking asylum as well as the arbitrariness perceived in the interview process further exacerbate this feeling, and people's distress more generally. These findings are particularly alarming considering how long this transitional period can last for asylum seekers in European camps. In light of this evidence, European states – and we all – urgently need to take a stand on this.

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