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B.Sc. (Hons) Psychology

Final Year Project

Exploring the Refugee Experience and how it affects Mental Health
and Identity Formation of Refugees in Wales – A Thematic Analysis

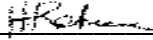
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requirements of Cardiff Metropolitan University for the
degree of Bachelor of Science

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own independent investigation under the supervision of my tutor. The various sources to which I am indebted are clearly indicated. This dissertation has not been accepted in substance for any other degree, and is not being submitted concurrently for any other degree.



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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of refugees and asylum seekers based in Wales, UK. According to the Red Cross there was an estimate of 118,000 refugees in the UK in 2016. Past research has shown that labelling someone a refugee enforces an identity of a passive victim and this has been found to be untrue. Each refugee experience is unique. It is characterised by trauma and loss – of property, status, social habitus and identity and refugees go through a process of identity re-formulation which can be influenced by a variety of internal and external factors. The aim of this study was to understand the struggles refugees and asylum seekers in Wales faced and how these affected their mental health and identity re-formulation. Participants were first generation refugees or asylum seekers who were recruited from a community centre focused on helping refugees, and data was gathered using semi-structured interviews. A thematic analysis found that the participants had all experienced loss, but they did not desire to be seen as victims of their traumatic pasts. They described factors which impeded their integration into life in the UK and affected their mental health – language and cultural barriers, the negative portrayal of refugees in the media and the suspicion which they faced from the authorities. Factors that helped their integration and worked towards improving mental health were support from the community centre and finding a sense of purpose. This study concluded that refugees were active participants in the re-formulation of their identity and a viable way of helping them with this process would be to make higher education more accessible to them.

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INTRODUCTION

The frequency of prolonged conflicts all over the world has increased over the years which has led to a surge in people fleeing war-torn areas in what has come to be known as the Refugee Crisis. According to the UNHCR there were 65.3 million such people by the end of 2016, a 40% increase since 2011 (Popstats.unhcr.org, 2018). 80% of these refugees were resettled in developed countries, including the UK (Redcross.org, 2018). Research has shown that there is a greater risk of refugees suffering from mental health issues, with most of the literature on refugee mental health focusing on trauma related disorders (Craig, et al., 2009). This approach to refugee mental health has been criticised for being reductive and inadequate in accounting for the whole refugee experience (Suarez, 2013). This study aims to qualitatively analyse lived experience of refugees based in Wales, focusing on how their mental health and sense of identity were affected during different stages of their experience, with the intention of reaching a more holistic understanding of the refugee experience.

The UK adopts the UN definition of a refugee. According to the UN Geneva Convention in 1951, a refugee is someone who 'owing to a 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 to or, owing to such fear, avail himself of the protection of that country' (UNHCR, 2011).

The UK Home Office grants refugee status to people who fit this definition. These refugees are granted residency within the UK for five years, after which they can apply for an extension or return to their own countries. To become a refugee in the UK, people must claim refuge when they arrive in the country. They then become 'asylum seekers' while their claims for refugee protection are assessed by the UK Home Office. Asylum seekers have fewer rights due to their temporary legal status: they have no choice in where they are situated, and they do not have the legal right to work or study. Once their claims are approved, they are granted refugee status.

The British Red Cross has difficulty in ascertaining the exact number of refugees and asylum seekers within the UK as this includes not only those whose asylum claims have been approved by the Home Office, but also those whose asylum claims have been rejected but who have not been deported from the country. The British Red Cross estimates that there were 118,995 refugees in the UK in 2016, amounting to 0.18% of the population of the UK (Redcross.org, 2018). As of 2015, there was an estimate of 10,000 asylum seekers and refugees living in Wales (Welsh Refugee Council, 2018).

According to the Red Cross only 45% of cases are successfully granted asylum in the UK. The rest are refused mainly because there is not enough evidence that prove that they meet the strict criteria of a refugee. Thus, the definition coined by the UN as an easy way to identify those in need of protection and shelter has become a criterion of measurement that these people must show evidence of fulfilling before they are granted any protection (Wilsher, 2003).

The UN definition distinguishes between the victim and the benefactor, thus creating a power structure that the refugee has no control over (Philips and Hardy, 1997). A bureaucratic label is necessary as it allows governments to identify those in need so that appropriate help can be provided. However, this bureaucratic label enforces a stereotyped refugee identity which makes refugees appear as helpless victims in need of help from host nations. As seen in how the UK Home Office evaluates asylum claims, it is in the interest of the refugee to conform to this stereotyped identity to be eligible for support and resources.

Identity formation is defined, in sociological terms, as a construction of personal narratives interconnected with the social and cultural environment of the individual (Somers, 1994). Past literature has shown that the stereotypical models of refugee identities as passive and 'incapacitated by grief' are wrong and need to be revised (DuBois 1993). For a refugee who is forced out of their country of origin, a reformulation of identity takes place, a process in which the refugee is an active agent (Ager, 1999). Castles (2003) recognized that there are specific phases of each refugee's experience that shape and affect their identity transition. These phases include fleeing from the unsafe country of origin, applying for asylum in a host country, waiting for the asylum claim to be accepted, integration in the host country and possible future reintroduction to the country of origin.

Although each refugee's experience is unique, a typical characteristic of the initial stages is loss – of property, social links and national identity (Baker, 1983). As Baker notes, this is because the refugee is forced to flee their country, usually because their life is at risk, and there is no set destination in mind for which the refugee can mentally prepare for. Applying Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources Model (COR) (1989, 2012) to the refugee experience puts the different 'resources' that the refugee has lost at the centre of their recovery process in how they contextualise their trauma and reshape their identity. Hobfoll (1989) outlines the types of resources that enable a person to cope with stress: object resources (material objects necessary to survive); condition resources (role and status in society); personal resources (sense of identity); and energy resources such as knowledge that can be used to gain other resources. The refugee's ability to integrate into the host country and reformulating their identity depends on the extent to which they can acquire these resources that they have lost.

There are barriers that refugees face when trying to acquire the resources they have lost. Firstly, while waiting on their asylum claim to be approved, they deal with a lot of uncertainty and curtailed rights as asylum seekers, which according to research is detrimental to mental health (White, 2002; Parker and Brassett, 2005). Secondly, asylum seekers struggle with language barriers (Beiser and Hou, 2001; Baynham 2006) and understanding different social and cultural norms (Bhugra and Becker, 2005). Finally, the political stance that the host country adopts towards refugees and asylum seekers also affects how the refugees are perceived by both the host community and themselves (Brun 2001). In the UK, anti-immigration rhetoric is the norm in both public and political spheres, especially post-Brexit (Tyler, 2017). In a discursive analysis of 40 media articles published between 2010 and 2014, Parker (2015) found a predominantly negative portrayal of refugees as 'unwanted invaders' with the focus of the articles urging the readers that these people needed to be removed from the country. Policies regarding asylum seekers and

refugees have become more restrictive since Brexit, with a new scheme introduced that would make it more difficult for future refugees to apply for protection for their families (Gov.uk., 2018). This anti-refugee stance is reflected within the public: a BBC poll conducted in January 2016 showed 41% of the responders saying that fewer refugees should be allowed to enter the UK (BBC, 2018).

Due to such negative connotations attached to the label of refugee, enforcing these labels on people can, along with constricting their identities into predefined stereotypes, also make them the targets of public prejudice. Wike et al., (2016) found that the label of refugee carried the stigma of an uneducated individual who would take away jobs from citizens of the host country and be a financial burden on the economy. Moreover, labelling people as refugees promoted an 'us and them' mentality, which was found to be more pronounced when the refugees were of a different ethnicity than the host population, suggesting racial discrimination, and leading to the refugees feeling ostracized and isolated within the host community (Zetter, 2007). Bosnian refugees in Britain told Timotijevic and Breakwell (2000) that being labelled as refugees made them feel economically and socially inferior, which negatively affected their self-esteem. Thus, rather than enforcing an identity in the form of a label, there is a need to understand the refugee experience from the refugee's own point of view.

Research has shown that there is a disconnect between what refugees think they need and what government agencies perceive their requirements to be. In a UK based qualitative study of a group of Somali refugees based in London, Warfa et al. (2006) found that the refugees reported that being forced to move constantly was detrimental to their mental health, while the Somali officials in charge of the decision thought it would be well received considering the 'nomadic background' of the Somali people.

This disconnect is most evident in research related to mental health of refugees. Turner and Herlihy (2009) recognize that refugee populations are at high risk of a number of psychiatric conditions and need the support of mental health organizations. The most commonly diagnosed disorders among refugees and asylum seekers are those that are characterised by anxiety and depression such as is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Major Depression (Craig, et al., 2009; Turner et al, 2003). Weine et al., (1995) found high rates of PTSD (65%) and depression (35%) in Bosnian children relocated to the USA and Fazeel, et al., (2005) summarised that when compared to the population of the host countries, refugees were ten times more likely to be diagnosed with PTSD.

However, the PTSD diagnosis has received criticism for pathologizing the complex coping strategies of those who have suffered trauma (Lee, 2017). In applying the diagnosis of PTSD without the global context there lies a risk of oversimplifying human responses to traumatic events: it stands to reason that what might be considered abnormal behaviour to a western psychologist might not be viewed the same way by a refugee from a different cultural background who has suffered through trauma (Suarez, 2013).

When applied to refugees, the PTSD diagnosis follows the life events model (Brown, 1989) with the understanding that the mental health of refugees is negatively affected by the acute stressor war. This fails to consider other factors of the refugee experience: there are many stressors both pre-migration and post-migration that can adversely affect mental health of refugees. Pre-migration stressors include persecution, physical and mental torture, loss of homes and economic stability, sexual abuse and loss of children (Warfa, 2007). Once arriving in a safe place, the refugee might experience further stress because of language and cultural barriers and financial and social instability which might lead to frustration, feelings of desolation and isolation (Schweitzer et al., 2011). Berman (2001) and Hollifield et al., (2002) theorise that due to facing multiple stressors in multiple different contexts, refugees are prone to more complex diagnosis beyond that of PTSD. Applying the COR model (Hobfoll, 1989) to the refugee experience allows for a more complex framework to understand how the ability to cope with their traumatic experiences is influenced by the refugees' ability to acquire new resources to replace the ones they have lost.

Therefore, it is important to understand that the situation of refugees who are situated in one area would be different to that of any others relocated within a different community. The aim of the present study is to qualitatively explore the experiences of refugees based in Wales to understand how the different phases of their experience have shaped their sense of identity within a foreign culture, and how it has impacted upon their mental health, so that the way can be paved for the introduction and implementation of efficient support systems that can be put into place to benefit the mental health of refugees.

METHOD

Ethical Considerations:

The refugees recruited were over the age of eighteen. As English was not the first language for any of them, it was ascertained that they were proficient enough to give informed consent. One of the main ethical considerations that was considered was that the refugees who agreed to participate would be discussing traumatic experiences. The participants were informed of the nature of questions prior to the interview, they were told that they could withdraw from the interview at any time and a member of staff was present on site to offer mental health support after the interview. Measures were taken to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. The names of the participants and any other names of places or people mentioned were changed and the audio recordings of the interviews were stored in a password secured laptop in a secure location.

Design:

The aim of the study was to investigate the lived experiences of refugees in Wales and understand the kind of issues they have faced and how those have impacted their mental health and shaped their identity reformulation. Thus, this was a qualitative study and data was collected using a semi-structured interview.

Participants:

Five participants were recruited from a refugee community centre based in Cardiff. The average age of the participants was 28 years ($SD = 2.12$). The inclusion criteria specified that the participants should be proficient in English to a certain level to be able to give informed consent. The participants were all first-generation refugees so they could recount both pre-migration and post-migration experiences. The table below gives a summary of participant characteristics. Names have been withheld to preserve anonymity.

	Code Assigned	Sex	Age	Legal Status	Country of Origin
Participant 1	P1	Male	28	Refugee	Sudan
Participant 2	P2	Male	29	Asylum Seeker	Egypt
Participant 3	P3	Female	26	Refugee	Egypt
Participant 4	P4	Female	31	Asylum Seeker	Syria
Participant 5	P5	Male	26	Asylum Seeker	Turkey

Table 1: Details of participants and their assigned codes.

Materials:

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with open ended questions related to the different phases of the participant's experiences. An interview schedule was drafted to encapsulate the different stages of the refugee experience based on previous research. The participants were given the option of refusing to answer any question they did not want to. The participants were given information sheets outlining the aims and purpose of the study and the possible risks. Consent forms were also provided and signatures obtained. Audio recording software on a mobile phone was used to record the interviews.

Procedure:

The participants were recruited from a community centre in Cardiff. The appropriate permissions were acquired from a senior member of staff who authorised the interviews once he was given a brief of the study. The interviews were carried out in a quiet meeting room at the community centre during office hours. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw at any time during the interview process.

Method of Analysis:

Thematic Analysis (TA) was chosen as the method of analysis for this study as the purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of refugees based in Wales. These experiences were vastly varied and using TA provided the opportunity to find patterns of meanings within each participant's data as well as across the entire dataset. This allowed for an understanding of the individual refugee's experience as well as for an exploration of the broader context in which those experiences occurred. The transcribed interviews were analysed using the six-phase procedure for TA outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the transcripts were read and re-read to gain familiarity with the data followed by generating initial codes. These codes were then grouped together in a search for emerging themes. The themes were then revised and defined resulting in the creation of the thematic map shown below.

RESULTS

The refugee experience of all five participants was analysed using thematic analysis. The themes that emerged from this analysis are as follows:

- Fleeing country of origin:
 - *Threat to life*
 - *Journey to the UK*

- Applying for asylum in the UK:
 - *Experiences with the Home Office*
 - *Life as an asylum seeker*

- Sense of Self:
 - *Label of Refugee*
 - *Re-defining self*

- Integration into the UK:
 - *Adapting to differences*
 - *Barriers*

The thematic map shows these themes and the sub-themes that are discussed in further detail below:

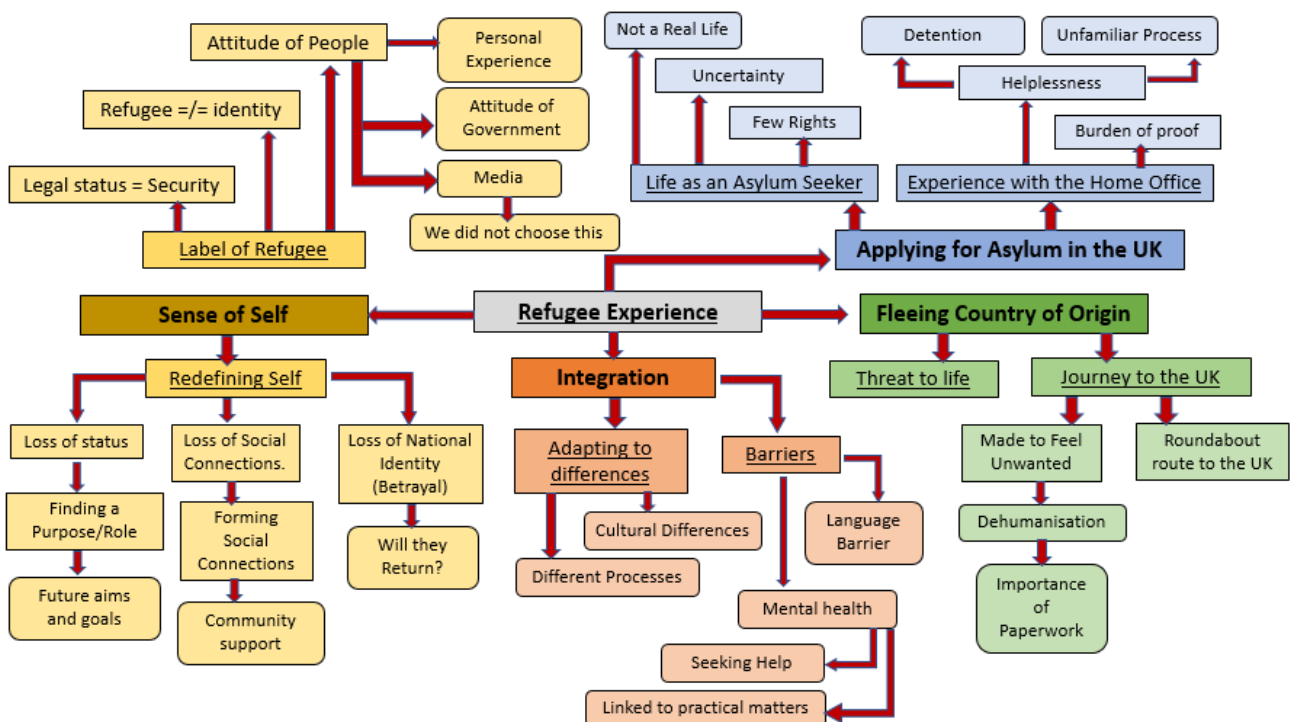


Figure 1: Thematic map outlining the themes within the Refugee Experience.

Theme 1: Fleeing country of origin:

Threat to life:

Describing the events that caused them to leave their countries, the specific reasons that each participant gave were different, but there was a unifying theme: each of them had left because their lives had been in danger. P1, P2 and P5 talked about how their lives had been normal prior to the events that caused them to leave. P2 did not want to talk about the details of why he left because 'it killed his heart'. P1 was a law student whose activism against an intolerant government made him a target. He was arrested and detained, and his family was threatened. P5 described how following the failed military coup in Turkey, his family had been accused of being involved and his brother had been killed, resulting in him fleeing the country to save his life from his own government.

P3 and P4 had been living in fear for some time in their countries before they managed to get away. P4, an internally displaced Palestinian had left Damascus and fled to the camps outside the city several years ago after losing her father, where she lost her husband to shelling. She had two young children and did not want a life in refugee camps for them, which is why she decided to make this journey. P3, who identified as a non-binary queer person, described their life in Egypt, '*surrounded by extreme hatred and prejudice*' (line60). They grew up in constant fear of being found out and persecuted for their sexuality, until they were attacked and raped, only to be arrested afterwards and disowned by their family. Thus, while the specifics of each participant's reason for fleeing their country were different, they all did so because their life was in danger where they were.

Journey to the UK:

Roundabout route to the UK:

Except for P3, all other participants got to the UK via a roundabout route. P1 travelled for five months and went from Sudan to Egypt, then Italy, France and then the UK. P2 reached the UK after four and a half years of travelling which included stays in Greece, Italy and France before the UK. P4 took a boat from Syria to Greece, and then came to the UK via Italy three months later and P5 fled to Greece from Ankara before being sent to France and then reaching the UK in a nine-month trip. None of these participants had a fixed destination in mind; their main aim was only to leave the dangers in their own country.

Dehumanisation:

When describing their journey to the UK, the participants talked about how they experienced a sense of dehumanisation. When describing fleeing their country by boat, P5 compared the refugees overcrowded on a small boat to animals (line85), while P4 described how the boats would capsize due to being too full, and the people would be stopped from boarding again: '*the man would hit them with the stick to make them go away. It was like they were not human*' (lines95-96). P1 also made a similar comment, about what it was like being in the jungle in Calais, France: '*There were so many people, all together like you know, like animals on a small farm*' (line94). There was a sense of detachment the participants displayed when talking about the horrors they had experienced on their journey, describing in general terms how bad it was for 'people' instead of using more personal language.

Made to feel unwanted:

P5 describes how instead of being treated as people who had fled horrible conditions and who needed help, he was treated like a criminal throughout his journey:

'They treated us like criminals. It was like, you were nothing if you didn't have the paperwork to prove who you were and where you were from. People were not seen as people in France. If you had papers you had rights, otherwise you were illegal, that's what they called us.'
(P5; lines92-95).

P1, who was also in France, talked about the authorities removing people from the city, until they were in the jungle in Calais. He described how there was scarcity of food, and fights would break out among the people who were all *'angry and scared'* (P1; line98). P5 also described the harsh conditions that he witnessed and suffered: *'I saw so many sick people, so much death, usually it would be the small children, who would die of hunger or disease'* (P5; lines98-100). He described how they were made to feel unwanted by the government which *'had gotten tired of the refugees coming into their country'* and had built walls to stop them. P5 was critical of this apathy from the government, he thought that instead of spending the money on trying to keep the refugees out, they should try helping them instead: *'It's cruel you know, not doing anything to help when you can'* (P5; line101).

Theme 2: Applying for Asylum in the UK:

Experience with the Home Office:

P2, P4 and P5 were asylum seekers at the time they were interviewed, P1 was a refugee and P3 had an Indefinite Leave to Remain. All the participants had to follow the same procedure of applying for asylum once they arrived in the UK, and were assigned government appointed lawyers to help with their cases. While each participant's case was different, there were some common themes:

Burden of Proof:

All the participants had to prove their eligibility to get refugee status. This meant interviews with the Home Office, as well as legal documents. For P1 this was easy and within five months of arriving in the UK, he had refugee status. For P4 and P5, there were complications, and P4 had already been rejected once. P2 had the most frustrating story to tell. He had been an asylum seeker for four years, and had several asylum claims rejected. He expressed a lot of frustration about what the Home Office deemed as acceptable proof of eligibility. He saw the Home Office as having all the power: *'If they believe you, it's easy. If they don't believe you then there's nothing you can do, if you give them proof, they will still not believe'* (P2; lines142-143). P5 expressed similar frustration, stating that the people doing the immigration interviews made it clear that they were unwanted, but went on to say that compared to other countries, they were treated better in the UK: *'at least we were treated like a person in need of help, and not like criminals, not like animals'* (P5; line110). P3 described the worst experience with the Home Office. They described being treated with suspicion despite having all the correct paperwork and made to go through extremely

invasive interviews, which included graphic details of their sex life, to prove they were queer. They described feeling powerless, and unable to refuse to answer:

'It was demeaning and scary and you don't know exactly what is appropriate and what isn't yeah? These people literally hold your life in their hands, so you want to satisfy them. It was humiliating and I felt so helpless but I knew I had to go through this.' (P3; lines116-119).

Feeling helpless:

The feeling of helplessness exacerbated for P3 when their initial asylum claim was rejected and they were sent to a detention centre pending removal from the UK. They compared the seven months they spent there to the last few months they spent back in Cairo: full of fear, uncertainty and helplessness:

'You go there, and you don't know how long you're going to be there for, but you don't want it to end because you know that after that they are going to deport you back to where you escaped from. The feeling of helplessness is all I remember from those months.' (P3; lines121-122).

They described being at the mercy of the staff at the detention centre and being mistreated because *'there is this idea that you just take it'* (line125). The guards would mistreat those who they thought were too vulnerable to resist and the participant felt like they were alone with no-one to call on for help: *'There was no one who could help at that point. You have no legal standing, no legal status, you basically have no rights'* (lines127-128). Being in the detention centre was detrimental to their mental health:

'My mental health was shot to hell at that point, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat, I kept thinking of what was going to happen. The stress was insane and the not knowing was like a sword hanging over my head.' (P3; lines130-132).

P4 also described the helplessness that came with being an asylum seeker, waiting for her application to be accepted. She felt she was at the mercy of the government to be reunited with her children she had left behind, and she lives in fear of the law suddenly changing and keeping her away from her children. P5 was frustrated at how people who cannot imagine what he had gone through were the ones deciding his life for him (lines170-171).

Life as an Asylum Seeker:

The three participants who were still asylum seekers described their life to be full of frustration and uncertainty: they did not know how long the asylum process would take, and they could not do anything to hasten it along. All they could do was wait.

'the most difficulty was that there was no, I did not know what will happen tomorrow and then next week and then next month and that is hard' (P1; lines208-209).

'I don't even know if I'm going to get refugee status, so it's like you're waiting without knowing what you're waiting for and in the meantime, you can't do anything'
(P5; lines134-135).

P2, who had been an asylum seeker for four years and had several claims rejected described his frustration at being left behind when everyone around him got their claim approved:

'it was not easy, always waiting, waiting, waiting. Everybody else, they get benefits, and they get a house and they're working, and I am waiting'
(P2; lines123-124).

P2 also expressed his frustration at being moved to four different cities within the UK. P1 compared life as an asylum seeker to being in prison:

'When I was an asylum seeker, I could not work, I could not have job, I could not go anywhere, there was no rights? Like no, no freedom. It was like being, it was like a prison'
(P1; lines205-206).

This sort of life was described by P4 as *'not a real life'* (P4; line24); and by P5 as *'not really living'* (P5; line144). P5 described feeling *'stuck'* as an asylum seeker, with nothing to do. He felt useless and bored, and not knowing how much longer it would take was *'frustrating and makes him angry sometimes'* (line145). This sense of uncertainty was detrimental to mental health: P3 described being paranoid and *'waiting for the other shoe to drop'* (P3; line150) even after getting refugee status. P4 also described how she would continue to live in fear of being rejected and deported even after she gets her asylum claim approved.

Theme 3: Sense of Self:

This theme explored how the participants sense of self evolved due to what they experienced and what factors had an impact on this process.

Label of Refuge:

Refugee status means security:

Having their asylum claims approved and getting refugee status was something that the three participants who were asylum seekers looked forward to as the status signified a sense of security. Compared to the uncertainty of the asylum seeker status, *'knowing that he can live here legally'* (P5; line139) was a major step for P5 in figuring out his life. P1, who had gotten refugee status recently expressed that he was glad that he *'was safe for five years'* (P1; line211). P4 expressed how getting refugee status would mean more rights for her, which included the right to bring her children to safety.

Using the label as an identity:

Despite wanting the legal status of a refugee, participants seemed hesitant to identify as a refugee. P5 did not consider himself to be a refugee, associating the word with loss and helplessness:

'I don't like that word. It is so passive. I don't think I am a refugee, I think I am a survivor. If you're a refugee you don't have a home, you don't have a country, you don't have anything. That word refugee, it makes me think of everything I have lost' (P5; lines150-153).

He thought the life of a refugee was a meaningless, helpless life which 'has no purpose' and in which he has 'no money, no status, no hopes of a better future' and in which 'everything is decided by other people who have power' over him (P5; line156). The negativity P5 associated with being a refugee made sense when he explained how the construct of a refugee was different in the UK from what it was in Turkey:

'Back home, we don't call the refugees 'refugee', we call them guests. We don't tell them that they have lost everything, and that we are so good for helping them, we treat them like we treat our guests. They are important, they have respect from people, we want them to feel welcome in our house and share our house' (lines163-166).

On the other hand, P3 and P4 agreed with labelling themselves as refugees though both had different reasons. P4 talked about being called a refugee even in Syria, the country of her birth, because her father had migrated from Palestine. She recalled disagreeing with the label then, as she saw Syria as her country. But when conditions deteriorated in Syria and her family was internally displaced to a 'Palestinians only camp,' she realised that 'we thought we belonged to Syria, but Syria did not think we belonged to her' (line164). Having lost her national identity as a Syrian, she turned towards Palestine. She linked being a refugee to her nationality of being a Palestinian, and to her family legacy: her father had made the journey to safety for the sake of his children and now she was doing the same:

'I think it is in our blood to be refugees. It is part of who we are as Palestinians. I am proud of being from Palestine, but sometimes I think, I think being a Palestinian means being a refugee, because your country is gone—you will always be a refugee no matter where you go because you don't belong anywhere' (lines169-172).

P3 also identified as a refugee, despite not being one legally. Part of P3's activism involved working with refugees and they explained that most people who are refugees rarely identify as such because of the idea connected to the word that refugees don't have a home. These people either still think of their old countries as home, or want to build a new home in the host country. So, for them being a refugee is an in-between state, not an identity (P3; lines221-224). P3 themselves identify as a refugee because as an activist, they fought for refugee rights and it was the group of people that they felt like they belong with.

Thus, the main connotations the participants associated with being a refugee were negative: refugees were outsiders and foreigners, who did not have a home. Participants who agreed with the label as an identity did so because of intrinsically driven reasons, and they chose to either disown the negativity associated with it: as in the case of P4 who was proud of the refugee identity; or fight it, as in the case of P3 who worked with charities for refugee rights.

Attitudes of the people, government and media towards refugees:

While the participants mentioned that people in Cardiff were nicer than people they had met elsewhere in the UK and described having received support from the community centre staff, P2, P3 and P5 mentioned experiencing negative attitudes from people. P2 described how he would refrain from telling people that he was Egyptian or Arab, as people would be scared: *'If I say I'm Arabic, they change face. They will look scared. Why are you scared? I don't know you, you don't know me, why are you scared?'* (P2; lines155-156). P5 described a hostile encounter during which he was told to go back to where he came from by someone at the bus stop. He stated that these kind of things 'make it very clear what people think of you' (P5; line198).

All the participants agreed that their interactions with the government of the UK were better than those with other governments. In the UK, they were given more rights: *'there is doctors and police who will listen to you, even if you're illegal'* (P4; line150). However, P5 argued that because the government was not outright anti-refugee, the anti-refugee rhetoric that is common in the media and the public was a surprise to him. He compared the UK to Donald Trump's United States:

'In America, people hate refugees, and you can expect that from them because their government is like that. Donald Trump is very clear, he hates us, he doesn't want us there, but no one says the UK does not want refugees. So, you would think, okay, this is a welcoming country, and you would come here, and the people are not like that' (P5; lines177-180).

There was consensus among the participants that the media's portrayal of refugees was generally negative. The common portrayal of a refugee by the media is of *'someone who is different, an outsider, not part of the country, here to take jobs and live off government support'* (P3; lines235-236). P3 described how there are discussions on talk shows and in newspapers about who has the right to seek refuge in the UK: *'Some people are adamant only people from within the EU should be allowed in, some people think only Christians should be allowed in'* (lines240-241). The views shown in the media affected people's attitudes: P3 described having to defend their right to be a refugee to an individual who thought that even though their sexuality was putting their life at risk in Egypt, it was not a qualifying factor for them to be granted refugee status: *'Your sexuality shouldn't be a national problem, he said'* (line244).

P4 believed that by reducing refugees to numbers the media dehumanised them, so that people in the UK no longer thought of them as *'people who have lost their homes, and they don't have anywhere to go'* (line259). The narrative that was in the media made it seem like

these refugees had a choice in coming to the UK, when this was untrue. Refugees did not choose to lose their homes, P5 stated, and P4 asked *'Why would a mother leave her small children behind and get on a boat, not knowing if she would survive, if there was a better option?'* (P4; lines255-256). P5 stressed that refugees were not the same as *'migrant workers looking for better opportunities.'* They were people who had to *'flee their country because their lives were literally in danger'* (lines238-239).

P3 talked about the anti-refugee rhetoric that was becoming prevalent among the public. Their experiences while working with the charity organisation they were involved in made them believe that the anti-refugee rhetoric was currently the *'acceptable form of hatred:*

'A lot of people I interact with who are anti-refugee are actually hiding their homophobic and racist ideologies behind this whole nationalistic thing of preserving their culture and looking after their own, because it is an acceptable form of hatred now, since Trump's America became a thing' (P3; lines246-250).

Thus, the support that the staff at the community centre and the welcoming nature of the people of Cardiff provided, did not balance the negative attitudes of people towards refugees and led to the participants having to face hostile interactions.

Re-formulation of Identity:

All the participants described losing parts of who they were when they decided to leave their country, and each of them described different factors that helped them re-formulate their identity once they were in the UK.

Importance of social connections:

All the participants lost the social connections they had back home when they decided to leave their countries: P1 talked about his wife he had left behind, P2 talked about missing his family and P4 mentioned her children several times, stating that re-uniting with them was her main goal for now. P3 described how making new social connections was a vital part of their recovery and helped ease their process of integration. Interacting with people in their age group who were also a part of the LGBTQ community helped P3 come to terms with their own sexuality, something that they had struggled with since they were young:

'I had hated that part of me since I was a child you know. It was how I was different, abnormal, unnatural. I let go of all that self-hatred when I met people who were different too, who were part of the LGBTQ community and they were such lovely people that the hatred seemed ridiculous' (P3; lines177-179).

Thus, forming new social connections helped in the reformulation of P3's sense of identity. This need to form social connections was also highlighted by P2's frustration and loneliness: he described finding it difficult to connect with people and was having a harder time getting used to life in the UK and spent most of the interview talking about life in Egypt.

Religious Identity:

P1, P2 and P4 readily identified as being Muslim. To them being Muslim was an integral part of who they were and that would not change no matter the country they were living in. P4 described being Muslim as the part of who she was that 'no one can take away' (line223).

'The way our lives are, we don't have many things that are stable. We don't have a country, we don't have people with whom we belong, we don't have any status here, but being Muslim is something that doesn't need a country or a status' (P4; lines219-222).

She believed that her faith had helped her survive the traumatic journey to the UK and it will continue to help her in her time of need. P2 and P1 also talked about being a Muslim, and expressed that even though it was different in the UK, it was not difficult, as the UK was accepting of all religions. They both mentioned how they missed the sense of community during celebrations of religious festivals back home. For P3, being raised Muslim was part of their identity that they broke free of when they came to the UK. They expressed that it was 'freeing' to let go of parts of them that did not make sense to them anymore, thus emphasizing how the re-formulation of identity was an active conscious process for a refugee.

Importance of purpose:

P5 was the most descriptive describing how being purposeless was a cause of frustration to him. He described how being a doctor back home and doing meaningful work that he loved was his purpose. His role was closely linked to his sense of identity:

'I had a life, I knew what I was doing, I knew who I was. I was a doctor, and a brother and a son. Now I am none of that, I don't have any sort of purpose in life, it feels like I am not living' (P5; lines205-206).

The only way to figuring out who he was, was to start working towards a goal, which is why P5 needed to apply to universities, finish his degree and 'move forwards.' He thought that that would improve his mental health as well.

P3 described how finding a sense of purpose was what started their healing process after their time at the detention centre. Getting involved with the charity and volunteering to help other refugees gave them 'a purpose and a fight to fight' (line156). P4 also described their goal; to get her children to safety, as the reason that they kept fighting. Her goal to see her children safe had given her strength that she did not know she had, especially after her husband's death.

'if it was just for me, I would have given up in Greece. But it is not just me, I have children who I need to think about. I wanted a better world for them, so I became strong for them. I think I am stronger than I think' (P4; lines310).

When asked to describe who they were, P3 and P4 both stated their goals as part of their identity:

'I am first a mother, and a Palestinian Muslim woman. And I am looking for a better life for my children' (P4; line324).

'I am an Egyptian queer refugee. That's who I am, because that is all the people I fight for' (P3; line211).

Identity linked to Nationality:

While P1 and P2 identified as Sudanese and Egyptian respectively and expressed a desire to return, P3, P4 and P5 described feeling betrayed by their countries and did not want to go back. However, they too chose to link nationality to their identity. P4 talked about how she used to think that Syria was her home, but now she felt like she 'didn't have a home.' She identified more strongly with her Palestinian roots since fleeing from Syria as she associated being a Palestinian with being a refugee, as their country had been taken over and lost.

P5 stated that he was Turkish at heart, no matter what, but he didn't feel like he belonged there anymore. He described feeling betrayed by the people who were so resolutely on the government's side and ready to persecute him despite his innocence.

'Turkey is my country, that cannot change – I love Turkey, I love everything about it, the food, the people with their big hearts, the way we do things. It's part of who I am, but I feel like I don't belong there anymore. It's like they don't want me there. I am Turkish and I will remain that way at heart. But I don't know if I can live among those people' (P5; lines259-263).

P5 reconciled the dissonance of identifying as Turkish yet being unwilling to live there, by describing how one day he will have children and he will raise them with Turkish values of being generous and sharing, and how if they know of their Turkish cultural roots, it would be enough for him.

This sense of betrayal was echoed by P3, who felt that the people of Egypt were blinded by their hatred and barely saw LGBTQ people as human anymore. But P3 stressed that they identified as Egyptian, despite not calling Egypt their home. This was part of their activism. They identified strongly with the LGBTQ people in Egypt who were still living in fear and used the platform provided to them by the free media in the UK to highlight the way Egyptian queer people were being treated. They defined their national identity as part of their cause:

'I try to be as visibly Egyptian and queer as I can. I wear my traditional Egyptian dress, and I put on my beaded belt and my beard and I belly-dance at protests and at shows. It is a political statement see? The Egyptian government denies we exist, so I revel in being as Egyptian and queer as I can be, using my privileged position to throw my existence in their face. In that regard, I am stubbornly Egyptian. Even if the Egyptians don't want me. Especially if they don't want me' (P3; lines 202-207).

Theme 4: Integration into the UK:

This theme explored the different factors that helped or impeded the participants' integration into UK society.

Adapting to Differences:

Unfamiliar Processes:

While all the participants mentioned how things like the weather and the food in the UK were different and they missed these things from back home, P1 mentioned how after getting refugee status, he had had trouble navigating the unfamiliar processes of applying for a job, and how this caused him a lot of stress:

'it's not good, it's like the stress and problem all the time and you're scared, and it's like a game which you do not understand, and you lose you die, like you will get out of the country' (lines128-129).

The participants mentioned that the community centre staff members were very helpful in answering any questions they had and this alleviated some stress.

Cultural Differences:

P2 described how people in the UK lived isolated lives which he contrasted with the sense of community that he missed in Egypt, where social bonds were more salient in the community, he felt distress due to feeling isolated.

'It is like everyone will have their own life, they don't care. Here, everybody will have same difficulty, but everyone will be alone.'
(P2; lines178-180).

P4 did not think culture shock was a major concern. She thought that it would be easy for her and her children to adjust to the multicultural community of the UK which was *'accepting of different people'* (line196). She explained that because she and her children had been living in the camps for so long, they had gotten used to a hard life, and things like cultural differences were not important as long as they were safe. She envisioned her children growing up with a mixture of traditions from back home and from the UK.

Barriers to Integration:

Language barrier:

P3, P4 and P5 had some English skills before they came to the UK, so they did not experience the language barrier that P1 and P2 did. P1 described how he knew only *'ten percent of English'* before coming to the UK and how English language classes offered by the community centre had improved his language skills. His future aims depended upon improving his English as he wanted to apply to universities to finish his law degree and currently lacked the confidence to do so. P2 found learning English to be very difficult and he was frustrated at not being able to understand anything for a long time after he came to

the UK: *'If you don't understand English, how will you understand? See, what is see? I don't know, for nine months I understand nothing, nothing'* (lines120-121).

Mental Health:

The participants accepted that their mental health had suffered due to everything they had experienced but the steps they took to seek out help differed. P5 thought that his mental health was linked to practical matters – once he had refugee status, he could start applying to universities to finish his medical degree and the sense of purpose thus provided would improve his mental health.

P3 and P4 talked about actively seeking help to improve their mental health. P3 described how their mental health was severely affected by the months they had spent in detention and how the negative spiral they were in was a barrier to their integration. They described how the sixty hours of therapy they were assigned because of being a sexual abuse survivor helped put things in perspective, and how that helped them to accept their sexuality and identity and stopped self-blaming. P4 described how she knew she needed to 'sort things out' and she started attending group sessions at the community centre where other women had 'similar stories' like her. She described how because she had control over improving her mental health, she took steps to do so:

'sometimes there are things that need to be said, and once they are said, you feel better. Not many things are like, I can change. I can't control so many things, but I can control this, so I have tried' (P4; lines281-282).

Feelings of guilt were something that P3 and P4 mentioned struggling with. For P4 these feelings were linked to her role as a mother, and the fact that she was safe when her children were not. Leaving her children behind was the hardest decision she had to make:

'It was the hardest thing, out of all the things, my father, my husband, I could survive that, but what kind of mother I am to leave my children and go away?'
(P4; lines84-85).

P3 too suffered from guilt when they thought about other Egyptian LGBTQ people who were still living in fear, while they had managed to escape. This guilt was a detrimental factor to both participants' mental health.

Another factor that impeded participants from seeking mental health was gratitude. P5 mentioned how despite being in group therapy sessions, he never participated as there were other people who suffered more than him, P4 mentioned thanking God that she had not suffered as much as other women had who had lost their children during the journey. This 'it could be worse' mentality made the participants downplay their own experiences and in the case of P5 stopped them from seeking help. Loneliness was also an issue for P1 and P2 and was the main hindrance to their mental health. P1 said that he coped with the feeling of loneliness by channelling it into his music.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of refugees situated in Wales and understand the issues they face and how those impact upon their identity reformulation and mental health. The five participants interviewed had fled their countries because their lives had been in danger. All except one, described a roundabout journey to the UK, during which they experienced dehumanisation and loss of rights. On arriving in the UK, all the participants applied for asylum and the process took varying amounts of time. None of the participants described positive experiences of being an asylum seeker, comparing it to a life in prison. While all the refugees admitted to wanting the legal status of a refugee, not all were ready to use the label as an identifier: P5 refused to do so, claiming the word reminded him of all he had lost. P3 and P4 agreed that they were refugees, both citing it as a part of their continued fight. All the participants described their evolving sense of identity using national, cultural, religious or social identifiers. P2 and P1 identified language and cultural barriers to their integration while P4 insisted that as long as she and her children were guaranteed safety, she was sure they would adjust to the multicultural society of the UK. P3 and P4 described actively getting help for their mental health, while P1 and P2 cited isolation to be the main problem they struggled with.

These results were in line with Baker's (1983) findings that refugees left their countries unexpectedly for fear of death and therefore faced post-migratory stressors that they had not prepared for. The dehumanisation and loss of rights that the participants experienced both during their journey and as asylum seekers within the UK are issues that have been researched upon. Gibney (2011) has criticised the uncertain non-status of the asylum seeker, and has accused the UK government of creating it as a stepping stone to refugee status to circumvent providing the rights of a refugee. An asylum seeker is stuck in an in-between state and is not afforded the legal right to work, has limited access to health support and government funds and is constantly under surveillance. Mountz, (2010) confirmed that the status of an asylum seeker fostered the sense of helplessness and frustration that the participants described in this study.

Interestingly, while the participants described 'feeling stuck' as an asylum seeker and living like they are in prison (P1); and despite describing their interactions with the Home Office as intimidating and frustrating, they still held the opinion that the UK was known to be a welcoming country. This shows that, what Porter (1979) called the most powerful British national myth, that Britain is a 'nation of refugees' is still alive and thriving to the point that P5 and P4 found the juxtaposition of their expectations of the UK and their experience with the 'culture of disbelief' (Souter, 2011, p48) that the UK government employs to deter refugees when reviewing their asylum claims (Kirkwood 2012), to be a jarring experience. Moreover, Hardy (2003) found that the Home Office itself was not aware of the situations in countries where applicants were from, and this ignorance led to unfair rejections. An example of this was found in P4's asylum rejection, when the Home Office told her to go back to Palestine, because of her Palestinian nationality, as they were unaware of the situation of Palestinians in Syria.

While participants were guarded in their criticism of the UK government, so as to not appear ungrateful (Goodman et al., 2014), they were more expressively critical about the media's perception of refugees. Content analysis studies analysing the discursive construction of refugees have confirmed the participants' views on how the media creates a negative figure of the refugee. These studies have found media sources guilty of using headlines to create links between refugees and crime rates (Lewis, 2005); perpetuating racist stereotypes (Greenslade, 2005); using dehumanizing terms to create the faceless army of 'unwanted invaders' that need to be kept off the British shores (Parker, 2015), and using metaphors of 'parasites' to create the stigma that refugees are an economic burden on the government's resources (Musolff, 2015). Parker (2015) also found a deliberately misinforming narrative of the 'dishonest asylum seeker.' Since 41% of asylum claims are approved (Popstats.unhcr.org, 2018), this mislabelling of all asylum seekers as illegal opportunists is misinformed and has a negative impact on the ability of asylum seekers to overcome this stigma and integrate in the UK. The reasons for creating this construct of the refugee are twofold: anger and controversy sell newspapers and, as P3 said, refugees are easily available scapegoats for racist and xenophobic ideologies (Esses et al., 2013). Goodman (2010) found that it was more socially acceptable to make racist and xenophobic remarks against refugees than any other minority group in the UK. Thus, the portrayal of refugees in the media affects the public and political opinion on them. These attitudes can be influenced: Pearce and Stockdale (2009) found that the lay person had comparatively more negative views on refugee issues than the experts, suggesting that educating people about the reality of issues can help foster a less negative image of refugees in the public and political spheres.

Parker (2015) had identified a gap in the literature regarding how refugees reacted to the negative portrayal of themselves in media, which this study addressed. P5 insisted on distancing himself from this negative construct of a refugee. He felt it was a passive label that reminded him of loss and helplessness. This was true for the rest of the participants as well: they associated the legal status of a refugee with security but associated the identity of one with victimhood. Zetter (2007) made this distinction between the legal category of a refugee and the label of one, acknowledging that while the refugees did not have the choice of having the label apply to them, they were agentic in how they perceived it and whether they accepted it as an identity, contrasting his own earlier research on refugee identity in which he had deemed refugees as non-participatory and powerless in their identity formation (Zetter, 1991). The participants who chose to identify as refugees had reasons for doing so: P3 chose to identify as a refugee because they related to the refugees in the UK whom they fought for, and P4 chose to identify herself as a Palestinian and claimed the label of refugee as part of the legacy of being from Palestine. The construct of the refugee that these participants related to was that of a survivor and a fighter, and in having reasons that were unique to them they exerted a form of control over a label that was otherwise applied to them.

The participants who claimed a religious identity cited it as an unchanging part of themselves over which they had complete control confirming Amini's (2009) research on the matter that had found religion taking precedence over all other identifiers for religious people. Research on the concept of a national identity and how it changes during the re-

formulation of identity that a refugee undergoes has not been as conclusive. Brun (2001) linked national identity to a place, and described asylum seekers as being in a transitional state as a people with no place. This was criticised for being too reductive by White (2002) and Parker and Basset (2005) who argued that legal citizenship was not the most salient feature of a national identity, rather it was the more intrinsic sense of values that formed one's national identity. This was echoed by the participants, especially by P5 who claimed to be 'Turkish at heart' because he saw himself as an embodiment of Turkish values. The distinction between the physical place and the sense of nationality was highlighted by the fact that though they identified with the nationality of their countries of origin, none of the participants, barring P1, wanted to return. This contradicts the idea that refugees preserving a sense of identity with their countries of origin do so because they want to return one day (Robinson and Rubio, 2007). Rather, the participants exhibited a sense of transculturism, especially P1, P4 and P5, who envisioned themselves living in the UK and building a life there, and raising their children with a blend of values and traditions from both the UK and their own countries. This is in line with Schneider and Lang's (2014) research into how identity evolves following a change in habitus. Interviewing Turkish-German migrants they found a propensity of the participants to exhibit traditional values with friends and family, and display a more assimilated persona in professional environments.

Mental health for the participants was related to their level of integration into the UK. P3 had been in the UK the longest, their legal status was confirmed and they had strong social ties in Cardiff. They seemed to be the most stable, while P2 was the least, having been an asylum seeker for four years. P3 stated that healing from all the trauma of persecution and detention they had suffered began for them when they got involved with a charity and found a purpose. Contrasting this to P2's frustration at life being boring and useless in the UK, shows how important having a sense of purpose is for mental health. P5 felt this starkly. He described being trapped in what Hobfoll's COR model (2012) termed a 'loss caravan' where his loss of a condition resource that was the sense of purpose he had as a doctor in Turkey left him unable to gain energy resources like money which in turn caused him to lose his personal resource of self-worth, to the point where he thought that his life was meaningless. Thus, applying the COR model can help identify the most salient resource that one needs to replenish to be able to move forward. Research has also shown that having a role that provides a sense of purpose or is seen to be contributing to the community helps improve mental health (Green, 1994; Strijk et al., 2011). P3 and P4 described feeling guilt at leaving people behind and being safe when others were not, which is as research has shown a common factor that impedes refugees from seeking help with their mental health (Wilson et al., 2006; Stotz et al., 2015).

P1 and P5 cited applying to university as a future aim, another step that P3 described had helped them move forward. Research has also linked education to an improved sense of self and therefore improved mental health (Green, 1994; Preece and Walters, 1999). P3 described how being at university provided them with structure and a clear goal that they could work towards. Thus, a way of helping refugees would be to make education accessible to refugees and asylum seekers. This would provide them with a structure and a sense of

purpose, help foster social links and build relationships, get them involved with the community and help them work towards a concrete goal. All these factors were found to impact upon the mental health of refugees and asylum seekers in Wales, in this study.

A considerable limitation of this study was the inclusion criteria that required participants to have a certain level of English language skills. As P1 and P2 described their frustration and helplessness during the time when they could not understand the language, it stands to reason that the people who did not fit this criterion would experience even more difficulties that would negatively impact upon their mental health. The research could have been more inclusive of these people if the use of a translator had been employed.

To conclude, this study provides a coherent sense of what the lived experiences of refugees based in Wales are like and how these affect their evolving sense of self. It also provides an idea of the sort of challenges refugees face and how these impact upon their mental health. The knowledge gained could be used to inform future interventions aimed at helping refugees integrate into life in Wales. This study concludes that refugees are active participants in the reformulation of their identity, they do not desire to remain victims of their traumatic pasts, and they want to move on and work towards rebuilding their lives.

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APPENDIX

Interview Schedule

Life in Cardiff:

- What is your current legal status in the UK?
- How long have you been living in Cardiff?
- What is it like living here?
- Could you describe what a typical day looks like for you?

Fleeing from unsafe country of origin:

- Where are you from originally?
- What was life like back in ____ ?
- Could you tell me why you left?
- What about your family?

Resettlement and integration in a host country:

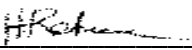
- How did you reach the UK?
- Where did you first stay when you arrived here?
- What was your first impression of the UK?
- What was most important thing to you once you made it to the UK?
- Could you describe what the asylum application process was like for you?
- How did you feel during the time it took for your asylum process to come through?
- Did you have any help with the process?
- Do you feel that you are welcome here in the UK?
- What does being a REFUGEE mean to you?
- What do you think people here think of refugees?
- Have you had any negative experiences with people in the UK?
- What kind of impact do you think your experiences have had on you?
- Do you think you have changed as a person because of everything you have experienced? How?
- If you had to describe yourself, how would you answer this question: who are you?
- Could you describe some of the challenges you faced while adjusting to life in the UK? *Language, culture, food, religion, jobs, status.*
- Have you talked to anyone about what you went through since coming to the UK?
- What kind of help have you received and sought out for your mental health?

Future plans:

- How do you feel when you think about the future?
- Where do you think you will be in five years?
- Would you want to return to ____ if things get better over there?

WORD COUNT STATEMENT:

Word Count	
Introduction	1942
Method	590
Results	4417
Discussion	2052
Total	9001

Signature: 

Date: 19-04-2018.