

Narrative responses to asylum crisis

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An introduction to the project

This project comprises of six distinct parts, as an effort to combine different settings I have visited when working as a psychologist for asylum seekers. The first part refers to and explains the temporary and difficult circumstances under which this project was attempted. The second part includes parts of narrative family and individual conversations I have had with people who were living in two temporary hosting facilities for asylum seekers which are now inactive. The third part comprises of conversations I have had with a knitting group of women I facilitated during my visit to a different hosting facility, now also empty. The fourth part relates to a collective document that was recorded, combining people's responses from those three settings mentioned in the first three parts of this project. The fifth part comprises of outsider witness practices I implemented as a request to the collective document. The last part comprises of some of my final reflections on this project and proposes possible next steps to follow.

Part 1: Temporality and difficulties

The idea of a non-permanent setting was nothing new to me. It has long been a predisposition of mine that life is fluid and unpredictable so I always keep in mind when I talk to people, that for any reason, such as mortality, relocation, or new employment, we may part soon. Working as a therapist, in a constantly shifting environment has proved to be more than a challenge though. Sometimes, it was much difficult to gain asylum seekers' interest and trust in the setting of a temporary camp where as noncitizens they had almost no control over their lives and future and felt like being in limbo waiting for their life to start. Not only did both parties, (therapist and consultant, me and them), knew that we were soon to be separated, but this was also a desirable wish because it would mean that they were finally leaving for a better place, eventually granted asylum status and heading for a permanent location soon! Despite this solid knowledge of our eminent parting, refugees I met with, were gradually engaging in narrative conversations and eventually forming a therapeutic relationship with me.

Narrative conversations took place with a considerable number of people seeking asylum either individually or within groups and families, always keeping in mind that our proximity is only temporary. Sometimes circumstances would overcome us, with very hard conditions, no electricity, water or heat. In these difficult circumstances, it was time to gather around a fire and find more ways to get warm. It was during people's hospitality and invitation in the warmth of their tents and burning fires that we had the opportunity to discuss about their experiences, their stories, skills and

abilities. I feel blessed I had the opportunity to be invited in their tents and in their hearts, listening to their stories and sharing practices of endurance and sustainability.

Part 2: Individual and family sessions - Practices implemented

Externalizing problems, giving them a name and mapping their effects and their history was mostly the way to initiate conversations (White, 2007). People were more than happy to talk about details of their journey, problems they faced along the way and still facing now. What seems to have made an impression on them, was mostly when I asked them to come up with a name for these!

'What name I would give to this? ...don't knowprobably.....'

Re-authoring life stories with identification of unique outcomes, through scaffolding questions of landscape of action and landscape of identity sometimes interfered and sometimes followed this externalization. Sometimes, conversations of name giving of the alternative story or stories and returning to landscape of action and landscape of identity questions on history of hopes, values and dreams also took place. Re - remembering conversations helped thicken alternative story lines.

Case I. Rr's Re-remembering of his deceased wife

'Has your wife been an important part in your life? In what way? What are some of the things you did together? Are there stories or experiences you wish to mention that show how your life changed when sharing it together? What difference did it make to you having her in your life? Did it help you see things in life differently? Did this help you know and familiarize with things that you otherwise wouldn't? Is this important? Do you think that you have played a significant role in her life also? Do you think that she also had something to learn from you that she may otherwise wouldn't have? Do you think it also made her see life differently? What do you think was different to her due to your presence in her life?'

Case II. K's Re-remembering

'Were there other people in your life that witnessed how important Spirituality is for you? If yes, if they were here listening to this part of our conversation what do you think they will have to say about you and how you managed to keep it close to your heart? What could this say to someone else, about you and how important Spirituality is to you, that despite the difficulties you were facing you somehow managed to keep it in your life? What do you think your sister will have to say concerning Spirituality and your plans for Insomnia? Would she be happy or sad to hear about these plans? What do you think your sister will have to say about your decision to come and talk to me about these concerns and experiences?'

K's externalization of Insomnia

'What are your plans for Insomnia, what are some possible ways to continue implementing these plans? How did you decide to put a stop to this? What or who helped you take this decision, did you talk about this with someone else, is it important to you that Insomnia doesn't interfere with your thoughts and emotions? Why is it important? What does this say about you and your plans concerning Insomnia and the place you assign for her in your life? What does it have to say about what is important to you in life?'

History of spirituality in K 's life

'Is this something new to you? Could you say more about how Spirituality came to be so important to you? Can you describe in detail some stories of this (when, how, with whom, where)? What did you do to keep it close to your heart; can you tell me a story of how you managed to keep Spirituality in your life?'

Finally, projecting the thickened story line into the future through more landscape of action questions and debriefing, also providing some landscape of identity questions in the end, revalidated re-authoring conversations and contributed to their authenticity and prevalence in time. Some examples of questions raised are:

'What plans do you have for this in the future? Do you think that Spirituality will continue to be your partner in life? Is this something you would like to have in your life? What steps could you follow in the future to be close to these values and keep them next to your heart?'

'What has really made an impression on me is that you describe a very difficult and stressful situation that was going on at the time, people in need, a situation resembling chaos and so on, and in this stressful and demanding situation you got the inspiration to help others and assist as the only one speaking the language. This inspiration, where did it come from, what do you think that this says about what you consider important?'

'You described me a situation when you were in need, with Loneliness and Hunger, and someone you hadn't met before helped you a lot and became your closest friend and provided for you. You tell me you don't remember his name but this doesn't matter. What does this say about you and how you value friendship and what friendship is for you and especially this kind of friendship that you mentioned had a perfect timing! This friendship that you describe as a gift, what kind of gift was it? Was it a desirable gift? What other values did this gift include for you?'

Part 3: The Knitting Project

Amongst the people I met, I also facilitated a group of six or seven women. A group of women sitting together and sharing stories, questions posed by me trying to create a friendly and trusting atmosphere, striving to thicken alternative story lines,

standing on hopes, values, precious moments and memories, opinions, dreams and insights about the future, sharing experiences of coping. They were happy to talk to me about God and family values, food and life in Syria, teach me how to knit. *'Family and God are the most valued principles for us, that is the reason why the bags we knitted are for the children and the Koran'.*

Why knitting bags?

I was struggling to find a way to engage this group of women in narrative conversations and capture their interest. During our first meeting, I asked what it was that they liked doing and they told me they liked to knit. Questions of how, when and from whom they learnt this skill followed. Who else knew how and when they started to knit? What is it that they liked in knitting? Influenced by the practices of the suitcase project (Clacherty, 2015) for supporting refugee minors, the idea of knitting small bags, to serve in the place of suitcases, came to my mind. I thought of using the knitting of bags as an ice breaker to facilitate conversations concerning important values and skills. I was curious to learn what precious things they would put in the handmade bags that inspire, sustain second story development and what kind of bags they would knit. I was very intrigued to see how they would go about choosing what type of bag to make. Some of the questions I implemented were: *'What do you plan to put in this bag you are making? Who is it for? Are you taking your bag with you in your journey from now on? What thoughts, memories, experiences you choose to carry with you from your previous life to the new place you are going and why? Do you take any good memories with you from your brief stay here? What makes this a nice memory for you?'* One of the answers I got really struck a chord for me and follows me in my heart: *"...I like it here, I feel like a guest who is constantly pressured on to stay longer, it is nice but I want to go and start my life and I always think about the children. I think that you like having guests so much here that you never want them to leave!"*

Practices of culture and ethnic cuisine

We carried on talking about memories and practices of our culture. We got to know each other and each one's traditions and topicalities. I could see that I immediately captured their interest bringing these up. I initiated this type of 're-remembering' conversation when one woman in the group observed that almost every day most Greek food, comes with potatoes as a side dish! We all laughed and the conversation that took place comes up to along the following lines.

Me: What is your favorite food? How do you make it? Is it difficult to make? Does it take a lot of time? Does it need a lot of ingredients? How did you learn how to make it? Is it for a special occasion?

Group reply: It is called... ..it is a bit difficult to make, it is made with.....and.....you.....and then

*you.....
..... it is just for sitting down and eating together as a family.*

***Me:** Is it a common thing to sit down and eat as a family? Is this important? Why?"*

***Group reply:** Every day we sit down on a blanket on the floor and eat together. Family values, children and the Koran are most important to us and to everybody. Everybody knows this; all our friends and relatives know this.*

***Me:** Sounds like friends and relatives offer mutual understanding and in depth knowledge of what is important to you and why. Have these important people, who are part of your family and friends contributed in your life in other ways? How would you describe me their relationship to you and some of the things you did together?*

Talking about important people in their lives we touched upon re- remembering conversations of living back home: *'What is it you like, living in your home country?'* As they described to me details and images of their previous life back in Syria, the things they liked to do and the desire they have in the future to be able to do those things again and eventually visit back home, a sentimental atmosphere was built. In fact, one of the ladies, Mrs R., got nostalgic and cried, she left the room for a while to see her children and came back. The others said that she had finally relaxed and let herself go and be free of her troubles.

Revisiting their words: *'Family and God are the most valued principles for us, that is the reason why the bags we knitted are for the children and the Koran'*, I remember parts of the conversations we had:

***Me:** What is it you value in looking after your children?*

***Group:** Getting the children safe and ensuring their access to education, finding ways to care for them. There is a responsibility towards children and securing a bright future for them.*

***Me:** Where does this responsibility come from? How long has it been an important part in your life? How do you plan on securing a bright future for the children?*

***Group:** By finding part time employment, by having them on one's mind constantly, by always being alert on possible dangers and ready to get up and run towards them, by doing a lot of things at the same time.*

We helped each other and laughed sharing the same wool, made jokes and had fun! We learnt from each other, how to make "suf" flowers, to keep in touch with others, getting firsthand information from other people that were in similar situations. The completed bags served as our banners in the group circle. In the end, we presented them to each other as a closing ceremony and got pictures, also gifting them to each other and our children.

Our knitted bags as banners



Our knitted bags as banners



Sharing experience and de - constructing dominant power relations

In the beginning, only one woman was mostly involved in our narrative conversations until the group eventually started to unclutter. As a therapist used to people from my own culture, more than willing to talk about their problems and what is bothering them, this was a challenge. Being an experienced worker with refugees in other communities who were used to my presence in the camps and behaved the opposite but reserved towards me, I was wondering what it was that kept this knitting group

from acknowledging me as their facilitator. I very discretely asked them whether they wanted to get to know each other better, and then it struck me. This group was formed and planned to be terminated very quickly due to the temporary circumstances of their impermanent stay. These people didn't want to bond and form a relationship with another person they will have to say goodbye to very soon. This got me thinking of my expectations as a therapist and as a worker. I became aware I was expecting to form a typical group therapy relationship with these women who didn't know me and had no intention of meeting a therapist. After I had recognized and challenged this context that was allocating power to the role of the professional instead of the people, I admitted that infatuated on my goals and purposes, instead of listening and following people's needs, I was also playing my part in the prevalence of the social disempowering context in which they lived in.

I became aware of the initial power imbalance with me being the privileged one as a psychologist and a European citizen. The questions I posed from the beginning were stated from a non-privileged stance trying to position people in control over their lives and to acknowledge their own skills and abilities. I never assumed I knew better than them and always had in mind not to get carried away by my own different culture, educational background; social status that inescapably formed some of my opinions. I completely managed to shift the power relation between us when I admitted that even though I was a worker I had no inside knowledge of when we are leaving this place and where we are going. I also said I didn't have any knitting skills and they volunteered to teach me! I was instantly transformed from being, (metaphorically speaking), the 'teacher' to a student. This really put me in a very different position, especially since I also informed them that I didn't have any children either. According to the Arabic culture this 'misfortune' also put me in a very disadvantaged spot! In a way, the group started to feel more privileged, their knowledge became undisputable and their family values were granted the recognition they deserved. In the end, we shared narrative conversations filled with experiences supporting alternative life stories.

Part 4: The Collective document

The following collective document was written based on the knitting group responses in the third part of this project and on individual and family narrative conversations in the second part. A collective document offered the way to include as many voices as possible concerning this critical issue of massive need of asylum. The main reason for creating this collective document was to act as a vessel containing people's knowledge and responses and communicate them to others. Documenting these and sharing them with people working in services offered to asylum seekers, might help construct innovative ways of thinking and responding to this crisis and challenge social norms and power relations between social services and refugees. A lot of effort and initiative had to be implemented on my part for the collective document in

this paper to be written. I was faced with a lot of difficulties on getting feedback from the people whose voices are in, because of a constant relocation of mine and theirs. In an uncertain, difficult, unpleasant setting and temporary mode, without official warning of my departure due date, I often suddenly had to say goodbye to many people, my narrative meetings with them left unfinished. This resulted in a permanent feeling of my eminent loss.

The writing of this collective document had a therapeutic effect on me, it served not only as a way of documenting people's practices as responses to trauma but also as my response to this constantly eminent separation and uncertainty. This practice provided me with a solid ground to stand on, a way to keep these relationships going, to have people's words and practices as an inheritance to hold on to and present to myself and others. People's state of migration resonated with what felt as my migration of identity. Through the document, I was facilitated in my rite of passage to revise my relationship with temporary working environments and grow as a therapist.

The document

A tear of war

The war is very difficult and all its stories are painful. Although it is difficult for people to take it, we are taking it. There are people whose eyes were closed and in this war their eyes opened. We are noncombatant, some of us suffered so much but some got advantages from this war. I really do not know what wrong a child made to end up playing with empty bullets and ruins. He collects them and plays. Before the war, this child used to see gun toys and ask his mother to buy them for him, he did not know that there are guns that kill. When he saw an airplane in the air he used to scream and jump out of joy, but now when he sees an airplane flying, he cries out of fear of bullets coming straight at him. What wrong did the child make to live in this inappropriate way? This child suffered and lost his father, who used to give him hope and helped him become stronger. The first day of 'Eid' celebration he was waiting for his father to congratulate him but the father did not come on this day. The other day they heard the news that someone saw his father's dead body. This kid did not sleep at all and was thinking a lot of his father. He hated anything that had to do with 'Eid', because it deprived him of the most precious person to him. Every 'Eid' this kid remembers his father who promised him not to leave him. Maybe death will not forget anyone but life forgot a lot of people. Although we suffered a lot, although our personality was messed up, we never showed that in our appearance, we always go out looking our best, putting on our best mask. We never show people how much tired we are from the inside, when someone asks us 'how are you?' we reply 'Hamdula' (Thank God)! Although we are in need, when someone asks us 'Are you happy?' we reply that we are better than others. Although oppression has killed us and despite all suffering we are living with, no home, no family, no future, we show people that we are not lacking anything but the One above this sky sees us. We

don't have to complain to anybody but Him because complaining to others is humiliation. God created us Syrians.

How asylum seekers respond to this crisis

God

Faith and spirituality give us strength. In 'jail camps' there was a prayer room designed only for men to go and pray usually every Friday but this was not enough. Sometimes volunteers or people working in Non-Governmental Organizations come and offer us a ride to local churches. Even though these are Christian churches we do not mind, we really enjoy the spirituality that this experience offers us. We have been away from this so long. In the end man dies but God is always around. We can handle the pain, the more pain you endure, the more God helps you go on.

Family values

We want to be close to our families, not apart. Family sticks together, united. Family is the most important thing to us. All we want is to keep the family together and safe. Re uniting with our families is a dream waiting to come true. Mostly women are the ones who take care of the children, men generally help little in this. Parents give comfort to the children. We try to pay attention to our children all the time but it is not easy, sometimes we are looking for them all the time only to find them playing with volunteers coming in the hosting facilities or social workers creating specialized (child friendly) spaces. This gives us time for ourselves but we are mostly worried for our children's future and education. We are waiting to leave Greece and our children have not been in school for years. What will happen with our children, their future, and their education? We are counting days and hours till we reach our family abroad. We talk to them almost daily and this helps. We are worried we might lose our families. When we hear, or see them better, we feel the same way.

Friends and humanity

I want to make friends. Making friends and relying on their help and on NGOs. People help us communicate with post office and receive letters or parcels from our family back in Syria. Provide information to us on free services, transportation; organize activities and events and informal learning activities for children and playing. People here have helped us a lot and treated us very well. They remind me of some friends back in Syria. We trust people who volunteer to help us and get us to a safe home. I have made some friends here, so I am a bit happy.

Just talking

Sometimes just talking to someone helps (a psychologist or a social worker from an NGO). Some often go to the doctor and get examined and talk about physical problems. Talking to a lawyer about asylum processes amongst others is another

thing to do. We go eat and drink coffee with neighbors, we cook together and talk about our problems and always tell the family everything.

Previous knowledge and other things to do

- 'Suf' – knitting groups of women making clothes and accessories for them and their children.
- Picking fruits from the trees, working in local market.
- Working as volunteers with NGOs or as interpreters.
- We make our own remedies when medicines are not available to us with simple ingredients such as sugar, water, flour, olive oil, ashes, cumin, mint, pomegranate, milk.
- Walking and making our body tired so we don't have the energy to make bad thoughts.
- Trying to forget, to pass time constructively, 'Sometimes I would sit and watch the fire even for 9 hours making sure it is still burning. I am happy to feel useful that at least I can keep my family warm'.
- Listening to songs and making videos or choreography.
- Learning English and German to be able to connect to the world, to be able to communicate.
- Try not to wake the children up when they are sleeping because it is better for them not to witness some things,
- Searching for love, giving love and falling in love and getting married.
- Sometimes youngsters and teenagers play with cell phones to pass time.

Keeping safe and warm

In the winter, men go out chopping and gathering wood to start a fire to keep the family warm and take care of them. We avoid getting in trouble. We all go together to the toilet at night because we are scared it is not safe. We stay in our tents during the night and hope no one will come in. We hug each other and when we hear something or someone we creak. We have been trained by the circumstances to keep ourselves and our families safe. Sometimes parents make sure their daughters get married in a younger age, now that they are not able to provide them with education with the lack of schools back in Syria, to make sure they have someone next to them to keep them safe.

Hope

I know that when I go out of this jail camp, once I move to a better place, this camp sadness I feel will go away. I know that they are not going to come with me my fears,

when I leave this place. I want to study to be a doctor. My hope has not died completely. We smile and maybe we will get over it. We want to see our families safe, if they are ok we will be ok.

Part 5: Outsider witnesses

Part of the responses to the collective document from outsider witnesses working within the asylum crisis context will now follow. Sharing the collective document with workers in the same field, health and other practitioners offering psycho-social, legal support, health services and cultural mediation, offered a pathway to pay attention to asylum seekers' voices and spread their message. A lot of people were willing to participate in a definitional ceremony and share their insights to the collective document. In more detail, outsider witnesses comprised of one nurse, four cultural mediators, two psychologists, two facilitators, one psychiatrist, one legal counselor, one general practitioner, all working in the health and social services provision for asylum seekers staying in temporary facilities. For practical reasons, responses in their entirety couldn't be included in this paper, but a representative example of our conversations will be shared. Conversations resonated along the four categories of enquiry for definitional ceremonies including words that captured the witnesses' interest, any images or thoughts about what seems to be important for these people, what they seem to value most in their lives, the reasons and experiences that resonated with the words and practices that made a stronger impression and the catharsis, the ways in which reading this document the witnesses were moved and their lives altered.

Outsider witness: Psychiatrist G.

Me: Reading this document, which words or phrases had a stronger impression on you, stayed with you and captured your interest, what images come to mind? Did you think of something or someone? Did it paint a picture to you?

G.: (.....) It reminds me of families at the camps doing things together, cooking, eating (....) Also, pictures of ruined neighborhoods in Syria, the guy with the small bench-shop at L. camp, men sitting at the old worn-out couches at O., how almost everyone went around wearing beach shoes (.....)

Me: When you think of the people that you described to me earlier, do you get any ideas about what these people might be asking for in their lives? Do you have any thoughts about the values, dreams or commitments they might have for their future?

G.: What I am thinking is that these people basically want a life and a purpose. Something to do, to have work, to feel useful and to be close to other people, friends and family. I think that family, protecting the family, having faith to God, being useful, work and justice hold a very significant place among their beliefs. Every day they try

to respond to these, any way they can. In the conditions that they are staying in, each one of these beliefs, is being put through a test, and this makes them feel anxious and that they are in a dead-end, but they are still trying to be functional in the best way they can through these difficult circumstances. So maybe their dreams for now are a bit pale, but their content is to have a normal life, the way they dream of it.

Me: Are these images or words close to your experiences? Did you think of something in your life that is connected to these?

G.: My work with and for refugees at the camps is full of everyday pictures like the ones written in the text. It also makes me think about times I meet with my family at celebrations, sitting together to eat etc.

Me: This small description that you have just provided, of family celebrations, do you think that it is in any way related to the values, purposes, dreams of these people that we talked about earlier? Finally, where does this experience transfer you, is there something you thought about, understood or read in this definitional ceremony that you believe you could keep it as your own knowledge in your life for the present, the future or even for the past?

G.: (...) of course, my own images and memories are close to the aforementioned experiences. They might be different concerning some details but I believe they are universal dreams, I don't think that they may not concern anyone, wherever he/she is or whatever she/he believes. I guess we are more the same than different, this is something I held as a belief earlier but now it is confirmed, after working with people from another culture. This resemblance brings their emotions closer, you are thinking that it could be you walking in their shoes. So, what stays with me as a feeling thinking all of the above, is gratitude for my fortune (...)

Part 6: Final Reflections -Possible Next steps

The main goal of this project was to enlighten alternative life stories containing autonomous ways of responding, and re-thinking prevailing contexts of passivity and helplessness that asylum seekers are mostly perceived in and projected by social media, social services and other dominant discourses. Shifting the gaze of the trained specialist to a different standpoint of practices of empowering, positioning refugees themselves in the specialist spectrum, presenting the ways and practices they know and implement for themselves throughout the hardships they endure might hopefully be an idea not to be ignored and eventually an approach to be considered.

People's words and practices were documented and contained in this paper, with permission to publish and seek feedback for, using pseudonyms. Regrettably, I have no knowledge of most of people's current whereabouts and the opportunity to hear their reflections and facilitate the're- telling of the re- telling' is doubtful. I had to rely on limited feedback from the people whose voices were documented due to the

difficulties of the temporary setting. Finally, I consider this a living document and I keep trying to get feedback and responses to it from residents of other temporary hosting facilities and workers within them.

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