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2022-07

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Hartonen, V R, Väisänen, P, Karlsson, L & Pöllänen, S 2022, 'A stage of limbo : a meta-synthesis of refugees liminality', *Applied Psychology*, vol. 71. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12349>

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/345345>

<https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12349>

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**REVIEW ARTICLE**

# A stage of limbo: A meta-synthesis of refugees' liminality

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**Abstract**

The asylum regime encloses tens of millions of applicants for international protection in camps and different types of reception centres, to wait even decades for their cases to be resolved. Simultaneously both within and outside the nation state, asylum seekers and refugees occupy a social space outside the natural order of things, a stage of limbo. By incorporating the classical anthropological concepts of *limbo* and *liminality* to the methodological possibilities of meta-ethnography, we conducted to our knowledge the first meta-synthesis of 17 scientific peer-reviewed articles with the aims of defining what constitutes the concept of a stage of limbo and investigating refugees' and asylum seekers' agency as they cope when navigating in it. By dissecting detailed descriptions of forced migrants' experiences of liminality, our synthesis identified four key concepts involved in negotiations of agency in a stage of limbo: *process of eligibility*, *spatial-temporal inconsistency*, *ontological insecurity* and *actions*.

**KEYWORDS**

asylum seekers, human agency, liminality, meta-synthesis, refugees

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## INTRODUCTION

Information provided by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR, 2021a) indicates that there are 80 million forcibly displaced people worldwide. Of these, over 26 million are refugees, 45 million are internally displaced and 4.2 million are asylum-seekers. They, among all other migrants classified under the broad label of forced migration, represent a social reality—a *stage of limbo*—that captures the simultaneous existence of individuals within and outside a nation state (Coutin, 2005; Jaji, 2011, pp. 223; Menjivar, 2006). From texts aiming to reproduce images of this reality (see, e.g., Angulo-Pasel, 2019; Bauman, 2002; BBC, 2020; Fazel et al., 2005; Finch, 2015; Ramsay, 2020; Horst & Grabska, 2015; UNHCR, 2021a), it can be interpreted that the asylum process produces a survival system encompassing a relatively large population of socially heterogeneous individuals (Agier, 2002, pp. 322). They are removed from organised political communities, with no country in which to enjoy the right of residence (El Masri, 2020; Van Dijk et al., 2001). Acknowledging the wide range of legal and bureaucratic concepts related to forced migration and labels describing forced migrants (Sajjad, 2018), in this review, we focus solely on refugees and asylum seekers as liminal *personae* (Turner, 1969) and on the asylum regime as a limbo. We have also excluded internally displaced persons from the focus, since they have not crossed a border to find safety and thus remain under the protection of their own government (UNHCR, 2021b).

It is important to observe the phenomenon of forced migration through the lens of liminality, since refugees and asylum seekers exist ‘outside the natural order of things’ (Malkki, 1995), intrinsically connected to sovereign power in legal, technological, and political terms (Puumala, 2013, p. 950). Even though there are subtle differences between conditions in transit (e.g., Angulo-Pasel, 2019; Coutin, 2005), in camps and reception centres (e.g., Agier, 2002; Rainbird, 2014), and, for example, in city outskirts (e.g., Sargent & Larchanché-Kim, 2006), legal liminality is a shared attribute of them all. Any justification of their presence makes them, from a humanitarian standpoint, nameless, *homo sacer* (Agamben, 1998); individuals excluded from society, existing outside the law, in a state of exception, and deprived of basic rights and functions (Agamben, 1998). In such a stage of limbo their ‘lives may not be at risk, but their basic rights and essential economic, social and psychological needs remain unfulfilled after years in exile ... making them often unable to break free from enforced reliance on external assistance’ (UNHCR, 2004, p1).

Discourse concerning refugees appears to have two focuses, one on human suffering due to innumerable wars and conflicts, and the other on the humanitarian responses introduced by contractual or voluntary international agencies (Agier, 2002; Bauman, 2002). Coupled with dramatic media coverage of refugee crises (Hein, 1993, p. 44), refugees themselves appear to enter the discourse mostly as victims or as objects (Bauman, 2002, p. 343). This perspective is problematic, since it tends to ignore the multiple manifestations of agency among them. Neither waiting nor crisis is an inherently passive experience (Ramsay, 2017, p. 516). As Bauman (2002, pp. 343–344) has noted, all people, even refugees and asylum seekers, have their status *auctori*—they are the authors of their own life trajectories. Indicating their strong urge to strive towards hope for a better life, individuals break ties with their homes, families or, for example, economic security to seek protection and new beginnings from a foreign state and culture through migration (e.g., Hartonen et al., 2020, p. 10; Hein, 1993, p. 44; Ramsay, 2020; Tay et al., 2015).

Because of an explicit lack of legally recognised status—a betwixt and between situation—(e.g., Abrego & Lakhani, 2015; Jonzon et al., 2015; Menjivar, 2006; Seitz, 2017), the classic

anthropological concepts of *limbo* and *liminality* (Turner, 1969; Van Gennep, 1960) are categorically affiliated to the process of applying for international protection. On the other hand, we seem to lack a meta-synthesis of the terms. Thus, in this meta-ethnographic research (Noblit & Hare, 1988) we aim to characterise what constitutes a stage of limbo and investigate forced migrants' agency as they try to cope when navigating through it in the hope of a better life. We approach the research data with two questions:

1. What are the key characteristics of a stage of limbo in the forced migration context?
2. How do refugees and asylum seekers cope as they navigate through the stage of limbo?

This article proceeds as follows: first, we outline the conceptual and theoretical perspectives of *forcibly displaced persons*, *limbo* and *liminality*, *agency* and *coping*. By this, we aim to illuminate the legal premises for an individual to become a refugee, and the liminality embedded in this rite of passage (Turner, 1969; Van Gennep, 1960). We also aim to understand human agency as negotiation between the individual and the social context and 'coping' (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 3) as a normal response to stressful events. Second, we outline methodological approaches to our synthesis. Third, we present our study findings, line of argument and theoretical propositions.

## Conceptual and theoretical perspectives

### Forcibly displaced persons

Everyday discussions can be complicated by a dizzying array of labels for describing individuals crossing borders by irregular means (Sajjad, 2018). Even though these 'forced migration' terms are often perceived as synonyms, each carry with it a different set of legal ramifications. Conflating all of them as a homogenous group often leads to misunderstandings in the interpretation of data. Also, despite the major contribution made by the UNHCR since 1950, not all refugees are counted or recognised as such, and therefore they may not be eligible for the equal rights which that status provides (e.g., FitzGerald & Arar, 2018; Menjivar, 2006; Spitzer, 2006; UNHCR, 2010). Furthermore, the refugee definitions are declaratory; people are to be regarded as refugees until it is determined otherwise (UNHCR, 2021c).

Classified by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR, 2021a), the term *forcibly displaced person(s)* generally refers to refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons. With reference to the aims of this study, it is also important to note that the widespread phenomenon of forced migration also includes experiences of people such as environmental refugees displaced by climate changes (FitzGerald & Arar, 2018; UNHCR, 2016) as well as industrial refugees, including individuals forced to leave their homes after large-scale industrial programmes, such as the Three Gorges Dam (FitzGerald & Arar, 2018; Hwang et al., 2010).

The term *refugee* first entered the English language to describe the Huguenots expelled from France in the seventeenth century after suffering severe religious persecution (FitzGerald & Arar, 2018, p. 389), but in 'The genealogy of the refugee' (Malkki, 1995, p. 497) the modern definition of refugee lies in the post-World War II era in Europe, when certain key techniques for managing mass displacements of people became standardised and then globalised. The Allied Powers negotiated the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (FitzGerald & Arar, 2018, p. 389; UNHCR, 2010), which defines a refugee as a person 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, owing to such fear, or is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.’

The 1951 Refugee Convention granted refugees equal access to important state institutions such as courts, public relief, labour markets and education (e.g., Holzer, 2013, pp. 842–843), and the 1967 Protocol amendment further included the crucial non-refoulement principle, according to which refugees cannot be returned to countries where they will be persecuted. It also removed the geographic and temporal limitations in the 1951 Convention that applied to the refugee category of Europeans displaced by World War II (FitzGerald & Arar, 2018, p. 390).

The Convention's definition is one the most widely accepted international norms (Steinbock, 1998, p. 735) and these two international legal instruments are at the core when determining refugee status (UNHCR, 2019). By the year 2015, 148 countries had signed the Convention and/or the Protocol (FitzGerald & Arar, 2018, p. 390), and many countries have used the definition in their domestic asylum system, including the United States definition of asylum eligibility in the 1980 Refugee Act (Steinbock, 1998).

The term *asylum seeker* refers prima facie to a legal ‘betwixt and between’ status (Groeninck et al., 2020; Turner, 1969) that allows a person to reside in a foreign nation until their asylum application has been resolved (Council Directive, 2005/85/EC; Ministry of the Interior Finland, n.d.; UNHCR, 2010). On the other hand, confusion arises regarding those arriving without a valid visa or any other appropriate authorisation. For example, in Australia, when boat arrivals are intercepted, they are located to Christmas Island to wait for their cases to be resolved (Phillips, 2011). In the United States, the Clinton Administration sent approximately 34,000 Cuban rafters—balseros—to join approximately 14,000 Haitians being detained at the US Navy Base in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, in response to setting out for Miami in August 1994 (Campisi, 2005).

*Temporal Protection Status*—including labels such as B status, humanitarian admission, or special leave to remain—offers a degree of protection against refoulement (Sajjad, 2018, p. 41). It is a form of administrative relief and an exceptional measure to provide immediate and temporary protection for displaced persons, allowing status holders to legally reside and work for an assigned period inside State borders (Abrego & Lakhani, 2015, p. 270; Council Directive, 2001/55/EC). One of the features of temporary protection is that it can be reappraised multiple times, prolonging experiences of liminality (Abrego & Lakhani, 2015, p. 270). According to Menjivar (2006, p. 1001), as well as Horst and Grabska (2015), it is not simply status that matters, but the long-term uncertainty inherent in the status. Chase (2013, p. 863) describes that defending applications usually worsens the mental health of applicants.

To conclude, the presented legal conceptualisation gives us an opportunity to observe ‘refugeeness’ as a process of becoming a legally recognised holder of an international protection status (Häkli et al., 2017; UNHCR, 2019). Thus, legally recognised refugee status apparently reveals a legal exit point from limbo to a reincorporation and settlement in the host country, either temporally or permanently. On the other hand, despite the legal mandate to reside in a foreign country, and the access to the beneficiary systems it provides (e.g., Abrego & Lakhani, 2015), it has been widely reported that refugees still suffer from their liminality even decades after settlement (e.g., Becker et al., 2000; Bokore, 2013; Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2012).

## A stage of limbo and liminality

Arnold Van Gennep (1960) was the first researcher in the field of anthropology to note the regularity and significance of the rituals attached to the ‘transitional’ stages in human life. He discovered that all transitions, whether puberty, marriage, life crises or, for example, status changes, are marked by three stages that individuals go through: separation, liminality, and reincorporation. The phrase *rites of passage* has become a part of the language of many social scientific fields. His seminal work opened opportunities for later researchers such as Turner (1969) to further focus on the *liminal* stage of transitions.

The word limbo (lat. *limbus*) means ‘border’ or ‘in between’, referring to an uncertain situation or an intermediate state or condition (i.e., liminal space) that is beyond one’s control and in which there is no improvement or progress in sight (Limbo, 2021). Based on Turner (1969), liminal persons—‘threshold people’—slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and propositions in cultural space. In limbo, they exist betwixt and between positions assigned by law, custom, convention and ceremony (Turner, 1969). Their behaviour is normally passive or humble, and their position is marked by ambiguity and indetermination. The concepts of *limbo* and *liminality* have been used widely in the contemporary research literature, including, for example, that considering life crises and illness spectra (e.g., Cayless et al., 2010; Cronfalk et al., 2017; Lerum et al., 2015; Rodgers, 2014; Young et al., 1999), families of missing people (Parr & Stevenson, 2015), or research on physical spaces such as borders and borderlands (e.g., Andersson, 2014; Angulo-Pasel, 2019), prison meeting rooms (Moran, 2013) and abandoned sites in urban landscapes (Martinez & Laviolette, 2016).

Coutin (2005) explores ‘clandestinity’ as a hidden, yet unknown, dimension of social reality. He links the term *transit* to the *liminal stage* that denotes the time and space in which forced migrants are most bereft of state protection and, therefore, most vulnerable to crime, exploitation, injury and death. She conceptualised being *en route* as legal ‘non-existence’. Menjivar (2006) further conceptualised *legal limbo* and *liminal legality*, showing how liminal legality shapes ‘immigrants’ incorporation and membership in the host society, albeit not all immigrant groups or even immigrants within the same group are affected in the same way. Due to fear of deportation, poor work opportunities and separation from the family (Menjivar, 2006), temporal protection imposes a state of ‘permanent temporariness’ (e.g., Capri, 2020), causing intergenerational effects in forced migration trajectories. Gonzales (2011), for example, demonstrated the ways in which children in limbo learn to be illegal. Hadjiyanni (2002) has described how refugee identity is transferred and internalised through adults’ narratives of loss and, for example, Bokore (2013) has described how children may be conditioned by trauma transference from their parents. Furthermore, Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, and Suárez-Orozco (2011, p. 449) reported that children in legal limbo find themselves in the most liminal spaces of America’s dystopic schools in embodying acute fear, lack of emotional and psychological well-being, and lack of access to vital social capital.

Hadjiyanni (2002) has called refugee labelling a *title paradigm*, a source of controversial treatment in which flesh becomes a mirror of politics (Puumala, 2012) and refugee status as a ‘title’ earned upon displacement. First emerging as ad hoc, emergency, temporary measures for refugees to receive humanitarian relief and protection until a durable solution can be found to their situation, refugee camps have become a standardised, generalizable technology of power in the management of mass displacement, as it was towards the end of World War II (Malkki, 1995; Ramadan, 2013, p. 65). Agier (2002, p. 320) wrote that



'The camps are both the emblem of the social condition created by the coupling of war with humanitarian action, the site where it is constructed in the most elaborate manner, as a life kept at a distance from the ordinary social and political world, and the experimentation of the large-scale segregations that are being established on a planetary scale'.

Positioning asylum seekers' and refugees' existence simultaneously within and outside the nation state, refugee camps and reception centres of asylum seekers constitute a 'vital device of power' (Malkki, 1995, p. 498). The spatial concentration and the administrative and bureaucratic processes that camps facilitate within their boundaries (Malkki, 1995, p. 498) have in many cases transformed temporariness into a lifetime of waiting in spatial isolation (see further e.g., El Mashri, 2020; Martín, 2017). Caught amid puzzling procedures of determination of eligibility for international protection, applicants embody a status dissonance (e.g., Hartonen et al., 2020, pp. 8–9) that shapes individual self-perceptions (e.g., Hunt, 2008, pp. 284–286). After escaping pre-migration living difficulties (e.g., Li, 2015) and surviving dangerous journeys (e.g., Angulo-Pasel, 2019) the high, but elusive, hopes of forced migrants for a better future (e.g., Yako & Biswas, 2014) tend to lead them to an enduring period in unfavourable living conditions (Laban et al., 2004; Liebling et al., 2014). By challenging the notion of individual resilience per se (Groeninck et al., 2020), asylum seekers themselves have described the process as 'living between heaven and hell' (Hartonen et al., 2020).

Based on information from the U.S. Department of State (2021), approximately 15.7 million refugees under the mandate of the UNHCR are in protracted refugee situations, finding themselves in a long-lasting and intractable stage of limbo (UNHCR, 2004). It is not safe for them to return home, but they have not been granted permanent residence to stay in another country either (UNHCR, 2020). In a 'frozen transience' (Bauman, 2002, p. 345), the camps have gradually become sites of an enduring organisation of space and social life, and a system of power (Agier, 2002, p. 322). Over the decades, residents can transform camps into a state-like structure, 'city-camps' (Agier 2002, p. 322), with their own political and administrative institutions (El Masri, 2020, p. 5; Martín, 2017, p. 31).

## Negotiation of agency

The condition of consciousness is life, a process in which individuals by their actions strive to maintain this process both in themselves and in later generations, including active relationships with objects in the environment (Mead, 1932, pp. 69–71). In the field of psychology, internalism and externalism have been paradigms used to describe agency (Sugarman & Sokol, 2012). Agentive internalism considers that human agents are capable of reflecting on their immediate circumstances and, through their choices and actions, changing themselves and the course of their life, although, overall, choice and action are the result of neurophysiological mechanisms that are internal to individuals but operate outside and prior to their awareness and control (2012, pp. 2–3). By contrast, agentive externalism has the view that agency necessarily includes context, and the source of agency is shared between individuals and their environments and cannot be reduced entirely to one or the other (Sugarman & Sokol, 2012, p. 3).

Deriving from internal and external views, a social learning theory, first developed by Bandura (1977), has been used extensively to explain a range of human behaviour (Ogden, 2012, p. 44). By placing individuals within the context of both other people and the

broader social world (Ogden, 2012, p. 48), Bandura (1999, p. 2) proposes that 'In the agentic sociocognitive view, people are self-organizing, proactive, self-reflecting and self-regulating, not just reactive organisms shaped and shepherded by external events'. The theory suggests that human behaviour is governed by expectancies, incentives and social cognitions (Ogden, 2012, p. 48). External events (and thus their role as carriers of knowledge) always depend on the perceiving mind (Ringberg & Reihlen, 2008, p. 913). Appraisals of these events, the processes of matching, testing, comparing and decision-making (Hamilton, 1982, p. 117), are influenced by environmental feedback mechanisms, incentives (Ogden, 2012, p. 48) such as social interaction and the media. Appraisals acquire meaning through mental models, both individual and cultural (Ringberg & Reihlen, 2008, p. 913), and ultimately govern behaviour (Ogden, 2012, p. 48).

By referring to the socio-cognitive approach, we lean on Emirbayer's and Mische's (1998, p. 963) conceptualisation of human agency as 'temporally embedded processes of social engagement, informed by the past, and oriented toward future and present', as individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences, directed towards certain objects or things (Creswell, 2007, p. 20). Additionally, rather than simplifying it as sequential stages of acts, we emphasise agency as empirical social action, constructed through negotiations both socially and historically (Creswell, 2007, p. 20) in the flow of time through ongoing temporal passages or emergent events (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 968). In this, identities are lived in and through activity and are conceptualised as they develop in social practice (Holland et al., 1998, p. 5). By figuratively combining the personal world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relations (Holland et al., 1998), individuals establish strong emotional ties with personally and socially meaningful things such as places (e.g., Main & Sandoval, 2014), may be empowered through practiced collective identity and agency (Hökkä et al., 2017), and are overall active agents shaping their world (Hübler et al., 2020).

## Stress and coping

Asylum seekers are faced with high levels of post-migratory stress due to the uncertainty and uncontrollability of the application process, resulting in higher levels of mental problems (Biehl, 2015; Li et al., 2016; Robjant et al., 2009). Based on Solberg et al. (2021) interventions and policies should prioritise improving contextual factors inherent in the asylum-seeking process in order to reduce stress and enable coping. Thus, psychosocial stress model has become increasingly influential in the conceptualisation of forced migrants' psychological well-being (Ryan et al., 2008, p. 3).

Stress has been defined differently throughout the history from flight-or-flight models (see Cannon, 1932) to the general adaptation syndrome (Selye, 1956, 1982, see also Cunanan et al., 2018), and, for example, expectancy-value models of motivation (Carver & Vargas, 2011, p. 164). In general, it can be addressed that stress involves a transaction between individuals and their external world, and the stress response is elicited if the individual appraises a potentially stressful event as actually being stressful (Carver & Vargas, 2011, p. 163; Ogden, 2012, p. 294; Tamir et al., 2015, p. 90). This cognitive process (Hamilton, 1982) depends both on information contained in the situation and on information within the person (Carver & Vargas, 2011, p. 165; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Ogden, 2012, p. 294). Stress exists when a person confronts circumstances that tax or exceed his or her ability to manage them (Carver & Vargas, 2011, p. 4). Additionally, theories of stress-illness links suggest in general that nervous and hormonal responses can be the root cause of



diseases, especially if the state of stress is prolonged or intense (Carver & Vargas, 2011; Selye, 1982, pp. 11–15, Ogden, 2012, pp. 308–337).

In their classic work ‘Stress, Appraisal and Coping’, Lazarus & Folkman (1984, p. 3) view stress as a biological process of defence; an active process of ‘fighting back’. They called this process *coping*: cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage external and internal stressors. In their model, the stress response can take the forms of direct action, seeking information, doing nothing, or developing a means of coping with the stress through relaxation or defence mechanisms (Ogden, 2012, p. 295). Basically, viewed as strategies, *task-oriented coping* (or problem-focused coping) aims to alter the source of stress, *emotion-focused coping* to reduce or manage the emotional distress associated with (or cued by) the situation, *avoidance coping* to distract oneself or divert attention away from the stressful situation, and *social support seeking* to obtain advice and to seek spiritual support, professional help and social action (Berenbaum et al., 2003; Carver et al., 1989; Carver & Vargas, 2011, pp. 170–173; Endler & Parker, 1990; Frydenberg et al., 2004; Litman, 2006). Overall, task-oriented coping is presumably most likely if the stressor is something the person views as controllable, and emotion-focused coping is presumably more likely if the person sees the stressor as uncontrollable (Carver & Vargas, 2011, p. 171). Task-oriented coping has been seen to be associated with lower levels of depression, whereas emotion-focused coping is associated with higher levels (Berenbaum et al., 2003; Endler & Parker, 1990). Among emerging adults, agency is positively linked to exploration, flexible commitment and deliberate choice making, and negatively related to avoidance and aimlessness (see Schwartz et al., 2005, p. 222).

Inadequate coping can lead to depression, anxiety, restlessness, irritability, insomnia, somatic and even psychotic symptoms (e.g., Benham, 2021; Clays et al., 2007; van der Steen et al., 2017). Early symptoms, such as pain, fatigue, and other somatic symptoms strongly and consistently predict later psychopathology among survivors of terrorist attacks with post-traumatic stress symptoms regardless of gender (Stensland et al., 2020). A link between stress and decreased cognitive capabilities has also been reported (e.g., Liston et al., 2009; Pang et al., 2014; Skogberg et al., 2019, p. 261).

## METHODS

We conducted an interpretative meta-synthesis of 17 qualitative studies (Siddaway et al., 2019). With the aim of defining what constitutes the concept of stage of limbo and re-interpreting forced migrants’ negotiations of agency in their trajectories to granted international protection, we applied a line-of-argument meta-synthesis approach (Noblit & Hare, 1988) to draw out the ‘structures of signification’ within each study ( $n = 17$ ) and for the studies as a set.

A meta-study essentially involves three analytical phases: meta-data analysis, metamethod and metatheory (Paterson et al., 2009). Offering an appropriate balance between an objective framework, a rigorous scientific approach to data analysis, and the inevitable contribution of the researcher’s subjectivity (Lachal et al., 2017, p. 1; Siddaway et al., 2019, p. 751), the meta-synthesis approach is evolving, relational and creative in nature (Paterson et al., 2009, p. 31). Following the seven steps described by Noblit and Hare (1988), from data collection to text coding and finally writing the synthesis (Lachal et al., 2017), the steps are schematically represented in Table 1 (Paterson et al., 2009). As each method has its limitations, both inclusion criteria and theoretical perspectives drove the analysis in this study. The analysis excluded forced migration populations such as unauthorized (e.g., Coutin, 2005) and undocumented migrants

(e.g., Gonzales, Heredia, Negrón-Gonzales, 2015), and internally displaced persons (UNHCR, 2021a), limiting the forced migration populations to asylum seekers and refugees, including individuals with temporary protection status. Unpublished literature (Siddaway et al., 2019, p. 759) was also excluded from this review. The literature search, analysis of the material and interpretation of the findings were performed by the first author (see Siddaway et al., 2019, p. 761) with constant revision, evaluation and critical discussion with other authors in every phase of the review (Rose & Johnson, 2020, p. 439).

## Formulating the research questions and deciding what is relevant to initial interest

This meta-synthesis is the second article in a larger research project conducted among asylum seekers in Finland in 2016. The aim of the research project is to develop mechanisms to assist asylum seekers' language and cultural learning and empowerment in cooperation with teacher training (Hartonen, 2018). During the initial literature review related to the authors' previous study (2020), the terms *limbo* and *liminal* emerged frequently, signalling a strong link to forced migrants, but usually lacking explicit conceptualisation with respect to the effects of individual agency. Thus, two research questions were composed (Table 1).

TABLE 1 The seven steps of a meta-ethnography

Step 1: Formulating the research questions	What are the key characteristics of a stage of limbo in the forced migration context? How do refugees and asylum seekers cope as they navigate through the stage of limbo?
Step 2: Material relevant to initial interest	Electronically available, English language, peer-reviewed, qualitative, full-text research articles, including theoretical articulation of the liminal state combined with clear empirical evidence in an asylum-seeking context. Papers should offer analytical interpretations rather than only descriptive representations.
Step 3: Reading the works	Interplay of the data analysis spiral (Creswell, 2007, pp.151–154) with computer assistance to identify the most frequent and significant codes to produce an internally coherent and consistent code list.
Step 4: Determining how the studies are related	Adaptation of the data analysis spiral (Creswell, 2007, pp.151–154) using the Critical appraisal Skills Program (CASP)-10 instrument, to recognise and extract the significant concepts of each study independently.
Step 5: Reciprocal translation	Adopting the process of constant comparison (e.g., Paterson et al., 2009), to manually draw out and to identify patterns of similarities and differences, reinforced with previous theories of stress and coping (Berenbaum et al., 2003; Hamilton, 1982) (Table 3).
Step 6: Synthesizing translations	Developing the line of argument based on the relationship between the studies: The negotiation of agency in the process of eligibility in a forced migration trajectory (Figure 2).
Step 7: Expressing the synthesis	A stage of limbo creates individual level spatial and temporal inconsistency due to status dissonance between juxtaposition of territorial and state sovereignty and subordinated political agency, creating performativity that can be manifested in intergenerational action (Figure 2).

The literature selected to this review represents empirical studies that shed light on how the agency of asylum seekers and refugees is affected by their liminality and liminal status. Three of the authors have been publishing and teaching in the field of education during the past two decades, contributing to the questions of agency, participation and belonging in various contexts. The first author has been operating as a coordinator of asylum seekers' education in the reception phase, interpreting and observing the daily life of asylum seekers. Thus, we aimed to investigate how agency is negotiated in the interplay of the structural forces affecting the daily life of asylum seekers. Based on previous and emerging knowledge (Siddaway et al., 2019, p. 757), including production of search terms, preliminary inclusion and exclusion criteria were constructed.

The database search was targeted to three (Siddaway et al., 2019, p. 760) common social science databases (ProQuest, Scopus, and EBSCOhost) between 1 November and 26 November 2019. Each search was conducted separately, targeting the search to electronically available, English-language, peer-reviewed, full-text articles, with the search terms 'limbo' AND 'liminal' to all parts of the documents. A ProQuest search was conducted on 1st November 2019 ( $n = 341$ ), an EBSCOhost search on 25th November 2019 ( $n = 44$ ) and a Scopus search on 26th November 2019 ( $n = 174$ ). A total of 468 documents were downloaded and transferred to ATLAS.ti software (mac version 8.2.2[554]) based on the inclusion criteria (Figure 1). A record-keeping system was created before the database search, including records of details of the searches and their results, a list of the number of studies excluded in the screening phase, and a

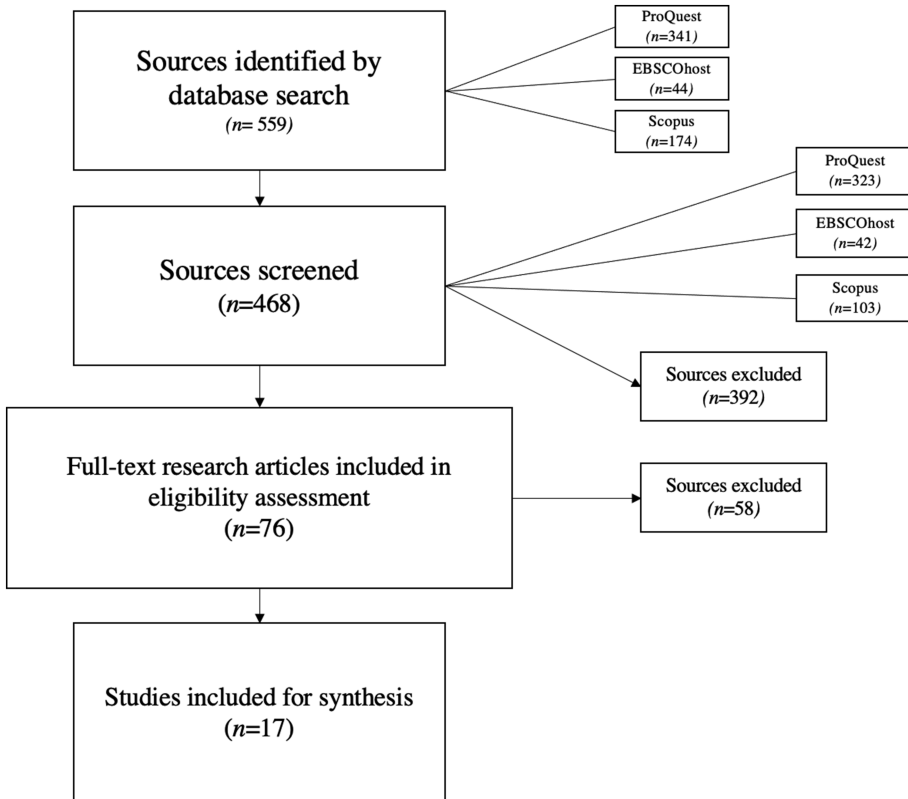


FIGURE 1 The flow diagram of study selection

table to record and describe in detail the characteristics of the studies included in the review (Siddaway et al., 2019, p. 759).

## Reading the works and determining how the studies were related

Creswell (2007, p. 150) explains that ‘Data analysis is not off-the-shelf; rather it is custom-built, revised, and choreographed’. In this interrelated process, researchers play an active role in the construction of the categories critical to theory building (Grodal et al., 2021, p. 592). In an iterative manner (Rose & Johnson, 2020, p. 347), we applied the data analysis spiral described by Creswell (2007, pp. 150–155) in our data analysis process, including reading of the works and determining how the studies were related.

In the first analytical cycle, documents were read through using the computer’s search function (cmd + f) for screening initial search terms and the context in which they appeared in the document and writing down first impressions and remarks. All downloaded peer-reviewed documents ( $n = 468$ ) were classified as inclusion, exclusion and borderline cases (Siddaway et al., 2019, p. 759). As suggested by Siddaway et al. (2019, p. 759), all the material was read through a second time and borderline cases were revised and classified under the inclusion or exclusion category. Since the review regarded liminality among forced migrants and, more specifically, asylum seekers and refugees, a total of 392 documents were excluded because they did not link any forced migration populations to the search terms, either implicitly or explicitly. A total of 76 studies were included for further reading (Figure 1).

In the second analytical cycle, *attributional coding*, classified as a generic coding method (Saldaña, 2015, p. 73), was applied to outline basic descriptive data of the studies and to provide essential information and context for analysis and interpretation (Saldaña, 2015, p. 83). The studies ( $n = 76$ ) were read through, noting the populations, aims, methods and data of the studies and recording the impressions and notions that emerged. Based on attributional coding and communication among the authors (Siddaway et al., 2019, p. 758), it was also possible to create final inclusion and exclusion criteria. The articles selected for further analysis included either (a) clear theoretical articulation of a stage of limbo or reference to the theorist or works that had previously theoretically addressed the topic; (b) clear empirical evidence, covering either asylum-seeking or refugee populations; or (c) descriptions of immigration law and its application in practice, covering either asylum-seeking or refugee populations. Studies ( $n = 57$ ) lacking clear empirical data or theoretical articulation of the search terms were placed in an exclusion category. After the exclusion, the second analytical cycle consisted of an assessment of construct validity for a total of 19 articles with a Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP)-10 instrument (Hannes & Macaitis, 2012, p. 432). Based on CASP assessment two ( $n = 2$ ) studies were excluded as irrelevant, yielding a total of 17 articles for discussion in this review (Table 2).

The third analytical cycle, *concept coding* (Saldaña, 2015, pp. 97, 119), was adopted to identify the most frequent and significant codes from the material ( $n = 17$ ), to extract and label ‘big picture’ ideas suggested by the data and assign meso and macro levels of meaning to the data analytical work in progress. Forming grouping codes, such as first- and second-order codes and overarching categories (Grodal et al., 2021, p. 2), a word or short phrase that represented a suggested meaning broader than a single item or action beyond tangible action was selected as a concept (Saldaña, 2015, p. 119). Through active construction of codes (Grodal et al., 2021, pp. 6–7), the material was coded separately with computer assistance, including constant comparison of data to data, data to code, code to code, code to category, category to category

TABLE 2 Studies included

Nro	Paper	Location	Participants	Approach	Data and material
1	Abrego and Lakhani (2015)	USA	<p>Study 1: Salvadoran TPS recipients (<math>n = 9</math>; 5 women, 4 men) and their relatives (<math>n = 23</math>)</p> <p>Study 2:</p>	<p>Qualitative interview and observation approach</p>	<p>Study 1: Data from 31 semi-structured, in-depth interviews.</p> <p>Study 2: Six months' observation data of case preparation meetings between lawyers and immigrant petitioners.</p> <p>In-depth, semi-structured interview data from 40 interviews with immigrants petitioning for permanent residency status (25 US visa recipients, 11 asylum seekers &amp; four VAWA deferring action holders).</p> <p>Interview data from 36 interviews with equal justice of Los Angeles and network immigration lawyers.</p>
2	Becker et al., 2000	USA	<p>Cambodian refugees with chronic illness (<math>n = 40</math>; age 50–79 years.)</p>	<p>An ethnographic approach including narrative analysis of open-ended interviews</p>	<p>Open-ended in-depth interview data from five interviews at 6-month intervals and the last two at an interval of 1 year.</p>
3	Bokore (2013)	Canada	<p>Somali clients at community health centers</p> <p>Own experience as a refugee</p>	<p>Interdisciplinary approach combining (auto)-ethnographic knowledge with literature and clinical patient experiences.</p>	<p>In-depth conversations in counselling sessions, health education and gender-specific support groups.</p>
4	Chase (2013)	United Kingdom	<p>Unaccompanied asylum seeker children and young adults between 11 and 23 years old from 18 countries.</p>	<p>Grounded theory approach</p>	<p>Qualitative interview data with unaccompanied asylum seekers (<math>n = 54</math>; <math>n = 29</math> girls and young women and <math>n = 25</math> boys and young men).</p>

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Nro	Paper	Location	Participants	Approach	Data and material
5	Haas (2017)	USA	Asylum seekers from seven different countries aged between early twenties and mid-fifties.	An ethnographic approach	Data collected over 14 months in 2009–2010, with follow-up visits in 2011 and 2012. Open-ended interviews, life history collection, everyday conversations and participant observation ( $n = 26$ ; female $n = 10$ and male $n = 16$ ).
6	Holzer (2013)	Ghana	Refugees in Buduburam refugee camp ( $n = 137$ )	An ethnographic approach	Data from field notes, focus group interviews ( $n = 10$ ), semi-structured interviews ( $n = 49$ ), peer interviews ( $n = 28$ ), observations, and documents and photographs from the camp.
7	Häkli et al. (2017)	Egypt	Asylum seekers Organisation personnel		In-depth interviews with asylum seekers ( $n = 21$ ) and personnel working with aid agencies and refugee-led community-based organisations ( $n = 5$ ). Ethnographic observation (2015).
8	Leubben, 2003	Germany	Bosnian refugees	Testimony method approach	Testimony method data from a rehabilitation centre for traumatised refugees.
9	Mzayek (2019)	U.S. (Austin, Texas)	Syrian refugees	Ethnographic knowledge including participant observation and interview data.	Participant observation data with 37 refugees (24 women and 13 men) combined with semi-structured interview data with 15 recruits (8 women and 7 men).



TABLE 2 (Continued)

Nro	Paper	Location	Participants	Approach	Data and material
10	Nimfür (2016)	Malta	Refugees whose asylum application had been rejected Institutional migrant actors ( <i>n</i> = 23)	A multi-method approach, comprising a combination of discourse analytic and ethnographic approaches	Data from interpersonal and informal encounters with refugees ( <i>n</i> = 22; age from 20 to 53). Data from informal talks with rejected asylum seekers. Data from informal conversations with local migrant actors ( <i>n</i> = 23). Media discourse was symptomatically considered, with secondary analysis of press articles and reports, political and human rights-based publications.
11	Nimfür and Sesay (2019)	Mediterranean area (Malta and Italy)	Refugees Institutionalized migration actors	(auto-)ethnographic approach	Data from fieldwork (2015–2018) with an approach that comprised interpersonal and informal encounters with refugees ( <i>n</i> = 22; male <i>n</i> = 12 and female <i>n</i> = 10), combined with ethnographic interview data with actors from 22 institutions ( <i>n</i> = 29).
12	Orton et al. (2012)	United Kingdom	Asylum seekers Health and social care providers	An ethnographic approach	An ethnographic data including field notes, 350 h of observation, semi-structured interviews ( <i>n</i> = 29) with asylum seekers ( <i>n</i> = 26) with follow-up interviews after 6 months. Five interviews with voluntary organisation staff, 10 with NHS staff and four focus group interviews.
13	Puumala (2013)	Finland	Asylum seekers	An ethnographic approach	Ethnographic data and interviews with failed asylum seekers.

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

<b>Nro</b>	<b>Paper</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Approach</b>	<b>Data and material</b>
14	Rainbird (2014)	United Kingdom	Asylum seekers	An ethnographic approach	Ethnographic field work with asylum seekers ( $n = 37$ ; age between 18 and 35 years) from 13 countries, including participant observation, conversations and interviews.
15	Spitzer (2006)	Canada	Refugees	Informed by two qualitative studies	Study 1: The collection of life stories from Somali women ( $n = 11$ ). Study 2: Interview data with ten women and men ( $n = 10$ ).
16	Twigt (2018)	Jordan	Iraqi refugees	An ethnographic approach	Data from semi-structured interviews with Iraqi refugees ( $n = 42$ ).
17	Wimark (2019)	Sweden	Queer refugees	An inductive qualitative approach	Data from semi-structured face-to-face interviews with refugees ( $n = 22$ ).

**TABLE 3** The synthesis

Third order interpretations Structural dimensions of a stage of limbo	Secondary order interpretations Concepts	Primary order interpretations Sub-concepts	Primary research papers (see Table 2)
<i>Process of eligibilities</i> The multiple social and infrastructural forces that an asylum regime produces in forced migration context, which both place individuals in limbo, and produces eligibilities for agency to manifest formally and informally.	Poverty-creating structures Status dissonance	Waiting Blocked mobility Policies & Laws Legal limbo Informality Subordinate position Prolonged liminality	1-9, 12, 14-16 1, 5, 10, 11, 13-16 1, 2, 6, 9-11, 15, 16 1, 3-7, 9-12, 14-16 1, 7, 9, 10, 11 1, 2, 4, 5, 7-14 1, 2, 8, 9, 10, 17
<i>Negotiation of agency</i> Creation of coherent and both internally and externally verified narrative of the self. A bodily-cognitive meaning-making process, in which memories of the past and high hopes for the ambiguous future interplay in the present, when individuals seek to understand, create meanings, and join the surrounding chaotic world.	Changes in identity structure	'Thinking too much'—effect Conditioning in narrative Representations of collective trauma Fragmentation	1, 2, 4-6, 14, 16 1, 2, 7, 9, 13, 14, 16 2, 6, 7, 8, 16, 17 4, 5, 9, 13, 14
<i>Actions</i> Coping strategies that individuals adopt while navigating and constructing temporal coherence in a stage of limbo.	Strategies Available capitals	Task-oriented Emotional-focused Avoidance Social support seeking Social Human Psychological Institutional	1-17 1-10, 12-14, 16 1, 2, 5, 7, 11, 14-17 5, 12, 13, 14, 15 2, 3, 5-7, 9-11, 13-17 3-5, 7, 9-17 2-5, 10, 12-15 3, 4, 8-10, 12-14
<i>Ontological insecurity</i> A cluster of variables that threaten individuals' holistic sense of security and physical integrity in an immigration trajectory.	Disruption of sense of security	Fear Uncertainty	1-6, 8-10, 12-14, 17 2-6, 9-11, 16
<i>Spatial-temporal inconsistency</i> Affective-structural inconsistency of the individual level existential feeling that life is proceeding; disruption of the essential feeling of connection, that life has meaning.	Disruption of the sense of continuum in life	Stagnation Loss of future prospects	4, 5, 10, 12, 14, 16 4, 5, 10, 14, 16
<i>Forced migration trajectory</i> Chronosystem of forced migration from separation and liminality to reincorporation.	Pre-migration issues In-transit Adaptation difficulties	Societal disruption Informality and extreme conditions	2-5, 7-9, 14, 17 3, 4, 7, 9, 11, 14, 17 1-3, 5, 7, 9-12, 15, 16

(Continues)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Third order interpretations Structural dimensions of a stage of limbo	Secondary order interpretations Concepts	Primary order interpretations Sub-concepts	Primary research papers (see Table 2)
	Refugee status	Work	1-3, 6-11, 15
		Racism	2, 6, 9-12, 15, 16
		Financial	2, 3, 6, 8, 9, 14,
		Cultural	15, 17
		Health	2-5, 9, 14, 15, 17
		Separation	2, 4, 9, 11, 12,
		Housing	15-17
		Language	2, 3, 9-11, 14
		Intergenerational	2, 3, 9, 10, 14
		Socio-political and socio-material resources	2, 3, 9, 15
			1, 2, 4-7, 9-14, 16, 17

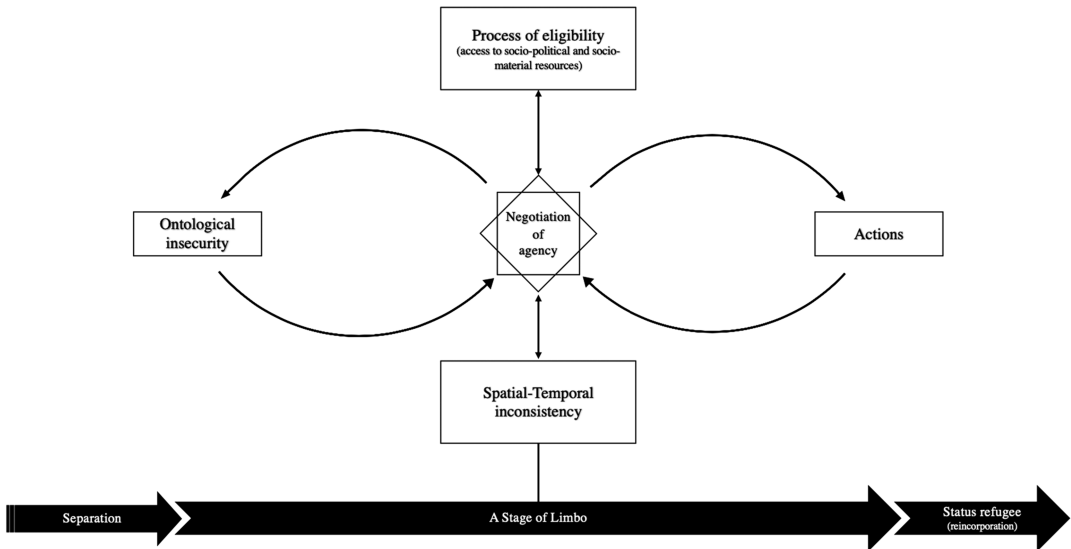


FIGURE 2 The line-of-argument

(Creswell, 2007, p. 68). Since the analyst adopts a highly interpretative stance in concept coding (Saldaña, 2015, p. 122), the process was enriched by active writing of the impressions and ideas that emerged from the material. Coding was followed by an evaluation phase, with critical discussion of the emerging code list, findings and preliminary interpretations with other authors. After the evaluation, the material was re-coded, followed by a re-evaluation phase. These analysis cycles were repeated to abstract and understand the core meanings of the codes and to produce first- and second order concepts.

## Reciprocal translation, synthesising translations and expressing the synthesis

Theory, as it is traditionally conceived, has four main characteristics, based on Saldaña (2015, p. 277): it predicts and controls action, it accounts for variation in empirical observations, it explains how and/or why something happens, and it provides insights and guidance for improving social life. In the fourth analytical cycle the primary goal was to develop theoretical organisation from the array of previous analytical cycles (Saldaña, 2015, p. 234). Codes were recoded after the evaluation phase previously described, following a re-evaluation phase to abstract and produce a smaller and more select list of broader concepts (Saldaña, 2015, p. 234). Concepts were then extracted from each study manually using a cognitive map technique (e.g., Axelrod, 1976; Barbarossa & Pastore, 2015) to identify, draw out and re-interpret the patterns of similarities and differences within the material. Throughout the process, it was possible to understand the core meanings of the codes and to produce first-, second- and third-order interpretations of the material represented in Table 3. Concepts such as *Spatial-temporal inconsistency* or *Process of eligibilities* suggest an idea, and concepts such as ‘*Thinking too much*’ effect or *Actions* refer to a process, such as surviving and coping in limbo, rather than an object or observable behaviour (Saldaña, 2015, p. 119). Throughout the process we were able to synthesise the findings and develop the line of argument and express the synthesis (Figure 2).

## FINDINGS: NEGOTIATIONS OF AGENCY IN A FORCED MIGRATION TRAJECTORY

The findings derived from this meta-ethnographic synthesis with line-of-argument design (Noblit & Hare, 1988) are the result of a continuous interplay of theoretical perspectives, research methods and corpus data ( $n = 17$ , Table 2) (Paterson et al., 2009). As a result of the process of assigning meso and macro levels of meanings throughout the primary and secondary interpretations (Saldaña, 2015, pp. 119–124, 250–225), it was possible observe the structural dimensions (Table 3) of negotiations of agency and especially the effects of limbo as individuals cope in a forced migration trajectory. To better answer the research questions, our findings (see Figure 2) are brought together in the following sub-sections: *A stage of limbo in the rites of passage to refugee status* focuses on the first research question, describing the characteristics of a stage of limbo; and the sections *Process of eligibilities*, *Ontological insecurity*, *Spatial-temporal inconsistency* and *Negotiation of agency and agentive actions as coping in a stage of limbo* are dedicated to answering the second research question, highlighting the forced migrants’ agency as coping.

### A stage of limbo in the rites of passage to refugee status

The analysis overall outlined the chronosystem of a forced migration trajectory. Functioning as a push factor in the *separation* stage (Van Gennep, 1960), the context of societal disruption (e.g., Becker et al., 2000; Bokore, 2013; Mzayek, 2019) created a condition in which individuals begin to hope for a better future for themselves or their families somewhere else. Häkli et al. (2017) describe this as attunement to the *figure* of refugee as both a legal status that provides access to socio-material and socio-political resources, and an identity structure, desired

and conflicted. Attunement can be seen as a long-standing and complex process of envisioning, learning about, and, finally, engaging in escape. Technologies, peer narratives, media and social media, movies, art and news (e.g., Häkli et al., 2017; Mzayek, 2019; Twigt, 2018), along with shared awareness of international laws (Holzer, 2013), all provide cognitive tools to plan and further execute plans to flee from oppression (e.g., Häkli et al., 2017; Mzayek, 2019).

In-transit (e.g., Mzayek, 2019; Nimfür, 2016; see also Coutin, 2005; Menjivar, 2006) forced migrants slip through the network of classifications that normally define states and positions in cultural space (Turner, 1969). As a result of fear of exposure to border control in-transit, they are often pushed into the field of the informal, operating clandestinely with smugglers, which de facto places the forced migrants into limbo (e.g., Häkli et al., 2017, p. 192). The pervasive elements embedded in the informality of clandestine presence are usually the harshness of the journey itself, danger from human aggressors, starvation, death, exposure to sexual violence, and, for example, exploitation by smugglers (e.g., Bokore, 2013; Haas, 2017; Mzayek, 2019; Nimfür & Sesay, 2019; Rainbird, 2014; Wimark, 2019). From the analysis, it was seen that it is not only smugglers that might take advantage of forced migrants' informality, but also labour market agencies, border control, security officials, and state officials (e.g., Abrego & Lakhani, 2015; Mzayek, 2019; Nimfür, 2016).

Passing through the cultural realm with only a few attributes of the past (Turner, 1969, p. 94), limbo and liminality appear to culminate when the migrants arrive at their destination, or in interrupted journeys (e.g., Nimfür, 2016). Status dissonance takes over autonomy, as the zone of state sovereignty strips forced migrants' agency (e.g., Chase, 2013; Orton et al., 2012). Being housed in isolated, overcrowded and prison-like conditions, and going through harsh interrogations (e.g., Leubben, 2003), forced migrants described being treated like 'animals', 'criminals' or like 'garbage' (e.g., Haas, 2017; Mzayek, 2019; Nimfür & Sesay, 2019; Rainbird, 2014). As Turner describes (1960, p. 95) that neophytes must obey their instructors implicitly and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint, forced migrants' protests have been shown to lead to immediate detention or/and deportation (e.g., Holzer, 2013; Nimfür, 2016). Bokore (2013, p. 98) described refugee camps as nightmare places:

'I remember watching my children starve, and I was desperate to feed them, fearing for my life and theirs. For a mother, a night in a refugee camp also means no sleep. She has to fight to survive the night, protecting herself and her children from wild animals and from human brutality. Rape of mothers and children is common in these camps.'

Our analysis suggests that reincorporation is related to legally recognised permanent protection status (e.g., Abrego & Lakhani, 2015; Becker et al., 2000). Describing this as incomplete inclusion, Abrego and Lakhani (2015) revealed that even though temporary protection status provides some crucial resources, such as opportunities to access highly paid jobs, the fear of deportation is constant, since only limited protection is granted to them. Separation from the family and the overall cultural 'language' (i.e., language, customs, traditions and environment) caused anxiety, sorrow, and consternation (e.g., Chase, 2013; Orton et al., 2012; Wimark, 2019). Even decades after settlement, post-migration difficulties, such as hate crimes (e.g., Mzayek, 2019) and discriminatory systems within schools, labour markets and housing (e.g., Bokore, 2013; Nimfür & Sesay, 2019), as well as inadequate support structures by the state and language difficulties (Rainbird, 2014), were prolonging experiences of liminality. The consequences seem to be clearly intergenerational. Bokore (2013, p. 102) estimated that about 70% of



Canadian–Somali youth exhibited the effects of trauma. School dropouts, engagement in criminality, gang membership, participation in extremist religious groups, addictions and inherited *murug*—sadness and depression—can all be a result of trauma transference (e.g., Becker et al., 2000; Bokore, 2013).

## Process of eligibility

Understandably, the process of eligibility emerged as a key concept from the data analysis, indicating that a stage of limbo is de facto legally constructed and maintained by the multiple social and infrastructural forces of the asylum regime itself (e.g., Abrego & Lakhani, 2015; Becker et al., 2000; Häkli et al., 2017). First of all, in the process of obtaining recognition from the authorities, unhealthy power relations between state sovereignty and forced migrants' subjectivity appear to condense down to various forms and guises of waiting. Operating almost instrumentally, it increased feelings of loss, uncertainty, anxiety, panic, and depression (e.g., Abrego & Lakhani, 2015; Mzayek, 2019; Orton et al., 2012). Waiting itself is an intrinsically affective phenomenon (Twigt, 2018, p. 1), but coupled with endless bureaucracy, legal uncertainty appears to impair individual self-worth (e.g., Abrego & Lakhani, 2015, p. 284). Negative effects of war on well-being were intensified by waiting for scheduled appointments, to hear from lawyers, to get limited work opportunities or, for example, for the overall outcome of one's case or reapplications and their appeals (Abrego & Lakhani, 2015; Haas, 2017; Mzayek, 2019; Orton et al., 2012). The analysis also suggested a strong link between waiting in legal uncertainty and somatic symptoms or other physiological stress-related changes, such as stomach pain or headache, nausea, and decreased immunity (e.g., Abrego & Lakhani, 2015, p. 284; Becker et al., 2000; Orton et al., 2012).

‘There was a woman there who lost all three of her children to the sea—she was doing this [tearing her hair out]. This woman had a girl and two boys, she said now what have I got? If I had a child, I wouldn't have gone. There was a woman on the boat who was five months pregnant, and she lost her baby.’ ‘Weren't you scared?’ ‘No not scared. I was happy to go. I had to leave. If I didn't leave, I would kill myself. I wasn't scared because I didn't care if I died. Now I don't want to die because I have a life.’ (Rainbird, 2014, p. 464)

Secondly, blocked mobility, caused mainly by status dissonance due to lack of legal recognition, increased feelings of entrapment. External resources, such as time, money, social support or education, all affect coping (Ogden, 2012, p. 327). By contrast, restricted job possibilities, housing problems, social isolation and separation from family have disruptive effects on self-esteem, identity, and connectedness to the world (e.g., Abrego & Lakhani, 2015; Haas, 2017; Puumala, 2013; Rainbird, 2014). Entrapment increased experienced anxiety and overall frustration (e.g., Holzer, 2013; Puumala, 2013). Operating through the instruments of waiting and blocked mobility due to lawfully legitimised social-structural forces, a stage of limbo has deeply insidious effects on individuals' sense of existential worth, producing bodily distress and desperation (e.g., Becker et al., 2000; Haas, 2017; Puumala, 2013; Rainbird, 2014).

‘Someone should protect me, what I'm going through. ‘Cause this is really torture ... how can you leave one problem [in Cameroon], come here and enter more

problems? But this is the worst because this life here, every day you are scared that they are coming to pick you, they are coming to take you back to the same hell you came from.' (Haas, 2017, p. 76)

The analysis further showed that the shifts in the political environment, mostly due an anti-immigrant advocacy, were changing eligibilities, producing, among other things, a plethora of confusing bureaucracy, bureaucratic hostility, lack of access to fundamental rights, unequal handling of cases, and inconsistent eligibilities to state-provided benefits between people of different origins. These structural forces were seen to cause tremendous harm, prolonging long-term feelings of vulnerability (e.g., Abrego & Lakhani, 2015; Becker et al., 2000; Nimfür, 2016; Spitzer, 2006). In temporary protection cases, processes of eligibility lead to multiple re-applications, or payments of large sums in processing fees, which constantly and repeatedly act as a reminder of one's liminality and the danger of protection being taken away, leaving one with nothing. Even trying to establish a new life seems a rather vague hope, because everything that has been achieved can be snatched away at any time. Temporary protection was therefore described more as a punishment than as a relief (e.g., Abrego & Lakhani, 2015; Nimfür, 2016).

'It's, it's like always limbo. Limbo, limbo, limbo. You don't know what to do today, you know. I think like this. Sometimes it's hard for me to sleep. Sometimes I need to get drunk to sleep. Because I will not, I cannot shut off my brain ... because of that limbo. That uncertainty. You know that is so, so unsettling ... I try not to worry about the things I don't have control over but sometimes I cannot help it ... This is my life.' (Haas, 2017, p. 80).

Thirdly, the process of eligibility was seen also to be related to informality and informal networks. Learning from other people's understanding and experience regarding transportation, travel routes and possible destinations (Häkli et al., 2017), lack of legal status makes individuals look for exceptional ways to strive forward in their liminality. In fear of exposure and deportation, many resort to false documents (e.g., Haas, 2017, p. 81; Nimfür & Sesay, 2019, p. 13), the help of smugglers for transportation (e.g., Häkli et al., 2017; Mzayek, 2019), and living a clandestine life for the sense of security that it provides (e.g., Nimfür, 2016; Nimfür & Sesay, 2019). With restricted job opportunities, many rely on informal labour markets (e.g., Abrego & Lakhani, 2015, p. 278; Nimfür, 2016; Nimfür & Sesay, 2019) in order to bring at least some sort of economic security to their situation.

## **Ontological insecurity**

As a part of the habitual aspect of human agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963), both learning from the past and oriented in the present, the analysis identified a pervasive element embedded in the forced migration trajectory: ontological insecurity, characterised by constant excessive fear and ambiguity. Firstly, there are concrete dangers inextricably linked to forced migration, and especially to vulnerability and informality. The dominant atrocities colouring the social context of separation are constantly present in limbo, informing from the past and affecting the negotiations of agency (e.g., Becker et al., 2000; Bokore, 2013; Chase, 2013; Haas, 2017; Leubben, 2003; Mzayek, 2019; Wimark, 2019). An environment of informality, which pushes individuals outside state-provided support systems and security services, opens

prospects for exploitation, violence and deaths due to exposure, starvation, or human or animal attacks (Bokore, 2013; Mzayek, 2019; Nimfür, 2016; Nimfür & Sesay, 2019; Rainbird, 2014). The analysis has shown that in terms of brutal violations of human integrity, especially for women and children, it is not only the journey that is extremely dangerous, but also life in refugee camps. It was also shown that it is not only fellow refugees or human smugglers that take advantage of their vulnerable position, but also security forces (e.g., Bokore, 2013; Orton et al., 2012). The *grey economy*, also revealed by the analysis, uses the vulnerable circumstances of forced migrants for its own benefits in all stages of the forced migration trajectory (e.g., Abrego & Lakhani, 2015; Mzayek, 2019; Nimfür & Sesay, 2019). Faced with acute financial difficulties, forced migrants appear to have no other options, even though they are aware of the persecution, exploitation, arrests and deportations (e.g., Mzayek, 2019).

The above-mentioned circumstances considerably affect how individuals envision and interpret the present and the imagined future. In limbo, the consequences of waiting in uncertainty together with manufactured/produced immobility (e.g., Abrego & Lakhani, 2015; Nimfür & Sesay, 2019) lead to ‘hyper-realisation’ of the present (e.g., Haas, 2017), causing a ruminative ‘*thinking too much*’ effect (e.g., Abrego & Lakhani, 2015; Chase, 2013; Puumala, 2013). In this, a traumatic past is usually reconnected and re-lived, with continual reference to the experiences of the present (e.g., Becker et al., 2000; Haas, 2017; Twigt, 2018). When ‘carrying traces of past experiences and injustices, intertwined with a sense of alienation, vulnerability and powerlessness’, the cumulative effects of waiting, uncertainty, anxiety and stress can further develop and (re)generate mental health problems and somatic symptoms. Hypertension, increased cholesterol, sweating, reduced appetite, acute headache, undefined pains all over, depression, sleeping problems and cognitive disruption are common in both asylum seekers and refugees (e.g., Becker et al., 2000; Chase, 2013; Spitzer, 2006). Struggling to cope with each coming day, ‘seeing only darkness’, two-thirds of asylees were considered to suffer from depression (Rainbird, 2014, p. 467).

Even if the asylum process and temporary protection status might bring temporary relief from acute and immediate fear, the experienced chronic sense of detachment, fear of being deported, lack of control over one’s life and future, constant waiting for resolution of asylum cases, pervasive insecurity and deprivation due to chronic economic discrimination, and status dissonance together appear to absorb vitality from forced migrants (e.g., Chase, 2013; Haas, 2017; Nimfür, 2016).

## **Spatial–temporal inconsistency**

As time is central to the framing of social life and bureaucratic systems (Griffiths, 2014), it is the incommensurable temporality that situates asylum seekers and refugees in indefinite indeterminacy, unable to project themselves into a certain or stable future (Ramsay, 2020, p. 387). Our analysis revealed that, by reaching into the spatial dimensions of the essential sense that life is a continuum, the structural forces of the asylum regime detach individuals from their hopes for the future and replace them with fears of the unknown (e.g., Haas, 2017, p. 82; Häkli et al., 2017 p. 194). This triggers feelings of stagnation and of being trapped in a state of transition. In profound uncertainty *time* seems to represent a form of non-time, time ‘being wasted’; a testimony to one’s social insignificance (e.g., Haas, 2019). Individuals’ inability to construct coherent future plans further disrupts their sense of meaning in life. This inability to plan coherently creates a psychological imprisonment in which uncertainty and investment are

simultaneously maximised, producing an affective state of 'extreme anxiety' (e.g., Chase, 2013; Haas, 2017; Rainbird, 2014) and reinforcing the sense of life being wasted (Twigt, 2018). Although time in limbo may provide temporary safety (e.g., Haas, 2017), quite uniformly, factors such as status dissonance and the spatial dynamics of waiting make asylum seekers re-live the loss of their past life, creating disorientation, confusion and enormous suffering overall (e.g., Chase, 2013; Haas, 2017; Nimfür, 2016; Rainbird, 2014; Twigt, 2018). For those with life-threatening conditions, the stressors of the asylum process can cause a serious danger to health and life (e.g., Becker et al., 2000; Orton et al., 2012). Above all, status changes, representing the primary hope and opportunity for a better life, have the most impact on forced migrants' well-being (e.g., Abrego & Lakhani, 2015; Chase, 2013).

## Negotiation of agency and agentive actions as coping in a stage of limbo

Rather than simplified, reducible experiences, socially situated action is always a product of a dynamic interplay between personal and situational factors, because external factors influence individuals not directly, but through intermediary self-processes (Bandura, 1999). Described as an intense comradeship among neophytes (Turner, 1969), social support-seeking strategies emerged in various forms from the data analysis. Häkli et al. (2017), for example, described social support-seeking strategies as connectedness, in which collective information, both spatial and temporal, was shared through social interaction (e.g., Häkli et al., 2017; Mzayek, 2019; Twigt, 2018; Wimark, 2019). Through this joint sharing of cultural experiences, it was possible to obtain help with various difficulties in limbo. Connectedness was seen to transform into a form of social capital used to help build creative support systems and gain human and financial capital, such as knowledge and abilities, to re-establish traditional loaning circles or study groups, and, overall, to help individuals create order in their lives (e.g., Bokore, 2013; Haas, 2017; Mzayek, 2019; Nimfür & Sesay, 2019; Spitzer, 2006; Wimark, 2019). Knowledge of former applicants was also shared in order to rewrite life histories to fit the definition of refugee (Nimfür & Sesay, 2019, p. 13).

Additionally, the analysis showed social support-seeking strategies to have a component that we came to call *narrative strategies for cultivating hope*. Firstly, knowledge of shared traumatic experiences was seen to provide redemption among forced migrants; normalising the extreme and lightening the burden (e.g., Bokore, 2013; Leubben, 2003; Rainbird, 2014). Those able to sustain positive parental models and family relationships could manage liminality better (e.g., Mzayek, 2019). Institutionally organised social support systems gave possibilities to picture one's own situation, to share experiences in a compassionate environment among people with a similar personal history (e.g., Leubben, 2003; Nimfür, 2016; Orton et al., 2012; Spitzer, 2006). Heroic stories (Rainbird, 2014) that highlighted personal survival provided the possibility to sense that forced migrants can independently master their own experiences. They also offered the possibility to make sense and order in a chaotic world and to reconstruct one's fractured identity (e.g., Bokore, 2013; Leubben, 2003). Secondly, we identified a faith component that gave many the strength to endure liminality. Putting one's destiny into the hands of God, '*In Sha Allah*', was a powerful force sustaining hope, even among people without religion (e.g., Orton et al., 2012; Spitzer, 2006).

People tend to use task-oriented coping if they believe they can influence the source of stress (Ogden, 2012, p. 327). Task-oriented coping included reactivity to and management of changes, such as keeping a mental record of bombings in war zones or identifying warplanes, bombs, or

attacks by sound (e.g., Mzayek, 2019). Due to the enormous frustration and anxiety that limbo itself produced, forced migrants took part in educational and volunteer programmes, choirs, and youth groups. Daily activities included, for example, social assistance to aid agencies and peers, food donations and home teaching (e.g., Chase, 2013; Haas, 2017; Orton et al., 2012; Rainbird, 2014; Spitzer, 2006). Daily activities gave a sense of purpose and meaning in life and helped with the pain of *'not moving closer to one's goals'*. Little tasks organised institutionally or, as Rainbird (2014, p. 469) describes, between family members, helped people to keep going and fight against depression, and functioned as a way of *'killing time'*. As a result of reduced autonomy and free will, many were willing to take extreme actions. For example, Nimfür and Sesay (2019, pp. 9–10) describe one Maltese NGO's illustration of how:

'a lot of women would become pregnant because they knew that if they were pregnant, they would be free from [detention]. If you are not pregnant you will stay there'.

Wimark (2019) reported that sexual privileges could be used as a trade-off during the flight. In the same manner, many were willing to sacrifice their own body and life by getting married in order to escape from limbo and in exchange for citizenship (e.g., Holzer, 2013). Phillips (2011, pp. 2–3) noted that the very nature of persecution means that forced migrants' only means of escape may be via illegal entry or false documentation. Thus, identity- and life-history falsifications were seen to indicate task-oriented coping (e.g., Haas, 2017; Holzer, 2013; Nimfür & Sesay, 2019; Spitzer, 2006). On the other hand, loss of prospects made some repatriate voluntarily, or just flee to somewhere else (e.g., Häkli et al., 2017; Nimfür & Sesay, 2019).

A stage of limbo is not palpable in its fullness, but rather in its emptiness (Haas, 2017, p. 77). This precipitated emotion-focused coping in forced migrants in introspective and expressive patterns, such as ruminative sadness. Rumination increased feelings of overwhelmedness, hopelessness and powerlessness (e.g., Haas, 2017; Mzayek, 2019; Rainbird, 2014). Life in limbo was expressed as being meaningless (e.g., Chase, 2013; Nimfür, 2016; Orton et al., 2012), contradicting the ultimate social aspect of human existence. The entrapment and isolation made asylum seekers 'see only darkness' and feel 'frozen', without knowing what to do (e.g., Chase, 2013; Haas, 2017; Rainbird, 2014). On the other hand, stagnation produced expressive patterns, increasing emotional arousal and affect intensity. These were discharged through expressive frustration, manifesting hopes, fears and grievances (Holzer, 2013; Puumala, 2013, p. 962). Anger, based on Puumala (2013, p. 962), was 'directed at a particular operationalisation of the international and its practices, as well as at the political instrumentalisation of the human body'. Protests (Holzer, 2013; Puumala, 2013), which were usually anchored in the claims of human rights, drew on suppressed agency at points when individual affect intensity built up, causing an expressive 'fight back' reaction.

To avoid triggering memories of experienced traumatic events, other forced migrants adopted subconscious and conscious strategies of avoidance (Rainbird, 2014). Poor sleeping patterns, dissociative amnesia, and silence about a traumatic past emerged as a universal pattern of coping among asylum seekers (Bokore, 2013; Rainbird, 2015). Many of the forced migrants lived out their limbo by ignoring the experienced reality and engaging an imagined one. Faced with the possibility that their desired 'future self' might be impossible to reach, fear of deportation caused many to give up, as they saw striving to be useless (Becker et al., 2000; Haas, 2017).

I mean, I've been lingering for so long that I've lost all patience for it. You know? ... I think now I'm just like 'whatever,' you know? ... It's hurt me so much that I don't

even feel the pain anymore. You know, it's like they're [immigration officials] poking me, poking me, poking me and at some point I just don't care anymore. Keep poking me. I'm done. (Haas, 2017, pp. 84)

## LINE OF ARGUMENT

Derived from the meta-synthesis, the key concepts of forced migrants' rites of passage to legally recognised refugee status help us to identify structural forces in which interaction with individuals' negotiations of agency is developed in a stage of limbo. Our analysis generated a line of argument (Figure 2). It maintains that: in a forced migration context the state of limbo is a legally constructed, bureaucratically machined, and spatially and temporally shifting deprivative social condition caused by a lack of full political status. It is a transitional ritual representing the trajectory from separation to the exit point of reincorporation as a person with legally recognised permanent protection status, obtained through the processes of eligibility. In a process of eligibility, an individual's agency is governed by state sovereignty with the instruments of blocked mobility and waiting. Fear of deportation creates an oxymoron of being safe in uncertainty. This generates disconnection from the continuum of life and disrupts the essential feeling that life has meaning, or that an individual has any importance. As a prolonged condition, individuals may suffer from their liminality even decades after settlement and the experiences of limbo may be transmitted intergenerationally.

In a stage of limbo, individual negotiation of agency is affected by ontological insecurity and spatial-temporal inconsistency that can hyper-realise the present, producing excessive anxiety, fear and sadness. Due to the lack of controllability of the outcome of the situation, liminality can increase emotionally focused coping, which is often observed as affect intensity and emotional arousal as individuals try to resist the stress caused by liminality. Although an applicant's behaviour can be observed as passive, because state sovereignty strips individuals of their full political agency, intense social connectedness with peers can be observed as individuals create, construct and share meanings of liminality and how to cope in it. When an individual's capability to further resist the stress of liminality decreases, exhaustion can be observed as depressive and self-destructive symptoms as well as avoidance and distraction. Additionally, a stage of limbo manufactures a social space of informality, as individuals are forced to seek livelihood, to cope and to strive forward in a forced migration trajectory.

## THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

### **A stage of a limbo in the rites of passage to refugee status**

The context of societal disruption, connectedness, and attuning to the picture of refugee status as a manifestation of hope for better life somewhere else provides an ensemble of factors pushing individuals towards a forced migration trajectory. Fear of exposure and deportation shove individuals in transit outside of nation state protection and into a stage of limbo. In the interaction with territorial state sovereignty, individuals are stripped of autonomy, status and mobility. Their present is highly monitored and their future is ambiguous. Although the asylum process and granted temporary status may provide temporary relief and disentangle individuals somewhat from immobility, the very temporary nature of these legal statuses



does not provide lasting relief from fear of deportation and overall anxiety, or prolonged experiences of liminality. As theoretically expressed, a stage of limbo represents a continuum from the point that forced the migrant to flee from their former country or region of origin to a legal exit point to the reincorporation stage as a refugee with legally recognised permanent protection status.

## **Process of eligibility**

International protection requires demonstrated evidence that a person is a refugee prior to the legal determination process. The status determination process, and the social-structural forces it facilitates by legal, bureaucratic and logistical means, construct and maintain a stage of limbo. Located simultaneously within and outside the nation state, applicants for international protection are stripped of the formal classifications that locate them in cultural space. With the instruments of blocked mobility and waiting, applicants embody a status dissonance that sets the limits and boundaries for agency to manifest. This causes a state of social, physical, and psychological entrapment, which may itself cause stress-related health problems. Additionally, the process of eligibility has indirect effects on the development of informality in forced migration trajectories, due, for example, to the lack of legal and formal opportunities to obtain a job, education or, for example, social security and beneficiary systems. Theoretically, the process of eligibility functions as a legally legitimated and bureaucratically manifested component that constructs and maintains liminality for individuals applying for international protection, since their cases are under consideration.

## **Ontological insecurity**

Living in constant fear is a pervasive element that is embedded inextricably in a stage of limbo. The experiences of forced migration are coloured by vulnerability to dangers, abuses and exploitations. Thus, expressed theoretically, in a stage of limbo, the essential psychological need for security, integrity, and a sense of predictability are disrupted. Further, this suggests that ontological insecurity is a major component in the forced migrants' negotiation of agency, creating the oxymoron of being 'safe in uncertainty'. It hyper-realises the present by accelerating normal meaning-making and information construction processes and converting them into a continuous *thinking too much* effect.

## **Spatial-temporal inconsistency**

In theory, in a stage of limbo, forced migrants occupy a state of transition in which time converts to a form of non-time. Due to the lack of future prospects, limbo creates a sense of detachment by diminishing the essential sense that life is a continuum. In between the borderlands of 'old' and 'new', status dissonance and a sense of stagnation create a psychological imprisonment, producing an affective state of 'extreme anxiety' reinforcing the feeling that life itself has no meaning.

## Negotiations of agency and actions

Forced migration imposes enormous stresses and dangers on individuals. Throughout the analysis it was seen that, ultimately, no matter what conditions prevail, whether subordinate, formal or informal, individuals engage in actions aimed at coping based on the negotiation of how agency can be manifested. As individuals negotiate agency to cope under extreme circumstances, due to the processes of eligibility, ontological insecurity, and spatial-temporal inconsistency, three fundamental components of agency are disrupted in a stage of limbo. First, evident disruption of an essential sense of security and integrity; second, detachment of autonomy and freedom of choice; third, detachment from the capability to construct and engage the vision that lies ahead.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this article, by adapting the classic anthropological concepts of *limbo* and *liminality* (Turner, 1969; Van Gennep, 1960) to the methodological possibilities of meta-ethnography (Noblit & Hare, 1988), we have conducted a meta-synthesis of 17 scientific peer-reviewed articles with the aim of characterising the concept of a stage of limbo in the forced migration context, and to investigate forced migrants' agency as they try to cope when navigating through it. Our analysis showed that use of the concepts of limbo and liminality gives us a powerful tool to observe those who are in transit across the symbolic boundaries between statuses and the unreal and affective socio-psychological state that liminality produces (Bruce & Yearley, 2006).

The article focused on asylum seekers and refugees as liminal *personae* (Turner, 1969). The analysis excluded forced migration populations categorised, for example, as unauthorized migrants (e.g., Coutin, 2005), deported (e.g., Sarabia, 2018), undocumented migrants (e.g., Gonzales, 2011; Gonzales et al., 2015; Salcido & Adelman, 2004), Deferred Action for Children Arrivals (DACA) recipients (e.g., Lauby, 2018; Luna & Montoya, 2019), stateless persons (e.g., Parsons & Lawreniuk, 2018) and, for example, other migration populations, such as guestworkers (Straut-Eppsteiner, 2016). Acknowledging the limitations of this study, emerging from the inclusion criteria, the conceptual and theoretical perspectives that have driven the analysis, and the methodological limitations of the selected articles, we have provided theoretical propositions to further examination of the key concepts (Siddaway et al., 2019, p. 756) and their effects on human agency in limbo.

In theory, a stage of limbo, as a social condition, produces a continuum from the point that forced migrants to flee from the former country or region of origin to a legal exit point through the process of eligibility; either as rejected, temporally protected, or as a refugee with legally recognised permanent protection status (FitzGerald & Arar, 2018; UNHCR, 2010). With legitimised socio-bureaucratic instruments (Malkki, 1995) of blocked mobility and waiting in uncertainty (e.g., Abrego & Lakhani, 2015; Haas, 2017), the process of eligibility strips applicants of their full socio-political and socio-material resources (Häkli et al., 2017), producing status dissonance and ontological insecurity, inducing perceived spatial-temporal inconsistency. This leads to the oxymoron of being safe in uncertainty; a bipolarity in which the refugee status constructs a dichotomy between possibilities to constitute oneself as human being, and, on the other hand, a loss of the concept of individual liberty (Hartonen et al., 2020, p. 12). The experience of liminality can also be painfully prolonged, as in the beginning of 2019 when nearly 16 million people were trapped in a protracted stage of limbo (UNHCR, 2020). For example, the

Palestinian refugee community occupies the same limited geographic space it did 72 years ago (El Masri, 2020). Tens of thousands of tents and other basic shelters in the Dadaab area have been hosting refugees since 1991 (Agier, 2002; Finch, 2015; UNHCR, 2021d).

Additionally, gaining temporary protection or becoming a refugee does not automatically lead to the possibility of being reincorporated into a political community as a citizen, and many refugee adults appear to maintain their refugee identity and liminal status (Mzayek, 2019; Nimfür, 2016). Awareness of economic repercussions and fear of deportation, embedded in temporary protection status, haunt individuals even after years of reconstructing 'new' lives by working regularly and establishing social ties (e.g., Abrego & Lakhani, 2015; Leubben, 2003; Nimfür, 2016). Lack of readmission agreements and social and physical mobility created by national and territorial border regimes and non-deportability among, for example, rejected asylum seekers, leave them with prolonged liminality (Nimfür, 2016; Nimfür & Sesay, 2019). In the case of rejection, individuals may decide to 'try their luck' to obtain a residence permit somewhere else, live a clandestine life (e.g., Häkli et al., 2017; Nimfür & Sesay, 2019) or, despite their liminal legal status, try to settle down and live a life on the margins (Nimfür, 2016; see also Menjivar, 2006, 2011).

Looking through the material, human agency itself was seen as a form of coping that arises as a product of the cognitive processes of everyday negotiations. Adverse events affect individuals by increasing stress reactions (Ogden, 2012, p. 296). If the stress-related emotional reactions are intense, prolonged, or repeated, a potential exists for disruption in one of more physiological systems (Carver & Vargas, 2011, p. 174). It has been proposed that stressors characterised by increased levels of uncontrollability and unpredictability are likely to induce excess fear and worry, as indicated by the presence of post-traumatic stress disorder (Foa et al., 1992), known to be common among refugees settled in Western countries (e.g., Fazel et al., 2005). Prolonged waiting certainly creates social suffering (e.g., Rainbird, 2014) that produces both emotion-focused and avoidance coping (Berenbaum et al., 2003, p. 272). The meaning-making process of liminality can be described as a *thinking too much* effect (see also Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2012), in which applicants are unable to shut down their thoughts (e.g., Abrego & Lakhani, 2015; Haas, 2017). This phenomenon intensifies the negative effects of war and conflicts in the present (e.g., Becker et al., 2000; Orton et al., 2012). Pre-migration traumas (Silove et al., 1997) remind individuals of their past and disrupt attempts to understand 'puzzling' procedures in the present (e.g., Abrego & Lakhani, 2015; Holzer, 2013). Applicants also show increasing emotional arousal, affect intensity, and excessive fear, worry and sadness (e.g., Haas, 2017). Loss of controllability of their cases (Chase, 2013) due to blocked mobility and subordinate position can lead to expressive frustration (e.g., Rainbird, 2014, pp. 471), such as protests (Holzer, 2013) or violent hunger strikes (see further Edkins & Pin-Fat, 2005). Puumala (2013, p. 962) explains that 'anger is directed at a particular operationalisation of the international and its practices, as well as political instrumentalisation of the human body'.

For agency, it is essential to provide mechanisms for cultivating hope, the essential component of meaning in life. The main task of all practitioners in the healthcare, social, education, economic or other social fields is to cut intergenerational deprivation chains and produce equity in opportunities to strive forward in life. Organised activities may have an impact on the empowerment of asylum seekers (Valenta & Berg, 2010). Language and cultural training and information programmes can increase asylum seekers' knowledge about society and them help to interact with people (Hartonen, 2018) and be independent (Valenta & Berg, 2010). The perception that one is cared for, esteemed, and part of a mutually supportive social network, has overall beneficial effects on mental and physical health (Taylor, 2011). Renner et al. (2012)

showed that social support provided by sponsors significantly and consistently reduces anxiety, depression and psychosocial problems over time, moderating acculturative stress and improving refugees' and asylum seekers' psychological health and adaptation. Boateng (2010) found that membership in local associations or groups and networks provided an important source of comfort, support and sense of belonging. An organizationally arranged storytelling approach (e.g., Bokore, 2013, p. 105) may also provide meaningful mechanisms to understand and channel effects caused by liminality and for mutual discussion and support. The testimony method (Leubben, 2003) can provide useful therapeutic and psychosocial interventions which are time-limited, straightforward, transparent, and predictable. Possibilities to construct trusting relationships in a non-judgemental environment can help forced migrants to gain prospects in life and maintain their self-esteem (Orton et al., 2012). Acknowledging and responding to the needs of forced migrants and encouraging them to tell and share their personal stories (Bokore, 2013) can help them to respond positively to settlement options and possibilities, despite the trauma endured.

Due to the large body of literature and prevalence among other forced migration populations (e.g., Gonzales et al., 2015; Menjivar, 2013; Vaquera et al., 2017), it would be essential to conduct a synthesis study that focuses on developing a theory on how negotiations of agency are affected by liminality. By providing the conceptual tools to understand the unreal and affective socio-psychological state that liminality produces, our theory development can serve as a basis for further studies on forced migration trajectories and also for studying institutional support systems with the aim of empowering asylum seekers and refugees.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank the editors of the *Applied Psychology: An International Review* and the anonymous referees for their engaged and helpful comments and suggestions related to this review. Work has been funded by University of Eastern Finland.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

## ETHICAL STATEMENT

Data for this review article have been collected from common social science databases and presented in Table 2. Article is the author's original work and not been previously published elsewhere. The results are appropriately placed in the context of prior and existing research. References and quotations are presented with high quality manner. All the authors have agreed for authorship, read, and approved the manuscript, and given consent for its submission for subsequent publication.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available in the supporting information of this article (see Table 2).

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**How to cite this article:** Hartonen, V. R., Väisänen, P., Karlsson, L., & Pöllänen, S. (2022). A stage of limbo: A meta-synthesis of refugees' liminality. *Applied Psychology*, 71 (3), 1132–1167. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12349>