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To cite this article: Raphaela Berding-Barwick & Ruth McAreavey (08 Oct 2023): Resilience and identities: the role of past, present and future in the lives of forced migrants, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, DOI: [10.1080/1369183X.2023.2266146](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2266146)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2266146>



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Published online: 08 Oct 2023.



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# Resilience and identities: the role of past, present and future in the lives of forced migrants

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## ABSTRACT

Resilience has often been used to understand how forced migrants cope in the face of adversities. It is generally described as a process embedded into the wider social environment, which entails the ability of individuals to respond to ongoing change. While much literature focuses on resilience-enhancing factors, advancing a more subjective understanding of resilience has been neglected. We build on ideas by Krause and Schmidt [2020. 'Refugees as Actors? Critical Reflections on Global Refugee Policies on Self-Reliance and Resilience.' *Journal of Refugee Studies* 33 (1): 22–41. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fez059>] on the importance of different temporalities for individual agency by examining the role played by individual memories of the past, experiences in the present, and ambitions for the future in resilience processes. Using data from a photo-elicitation study with forced migrants in the North-East of England, we focus on three individual accounts of resilience. Our research highlights how individuals proactively make strategic choices and assume responsibility for their well-being – even if that depends on changing underlying structural issues. We show that, despite a hostile immigration environment, as found in the UK, individuals are able to act and adapt to their environment, although this is limited to a degree. We demonstrate how time matters in personal resilience processes – both as a tactic for resilience for some and a disruptor of resilience for others.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 February 2023  
Accepted 18 September 2023

## KEYWORDS

Forced migrants; resilience; identities; North-East of England

## 1. Introduction

Some people [in the UK] ask me 'have you ever seen a car?' I answered, of course I had a very good car when I was in my country. I was educated in a very good field. [...] I studied in Electricity, I had a Bachelor's degree, so I studied in a very difficult field, and I graduated with very good scores, and I went to military service and I did all of them because I wanted to have a very clear future [...]. But at the moment, I guess, I just need to leave all of them. I just think they are useless now, and what I have done, in my previous life, it's wasted. (Sahar)

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Sahar's words powerfully illustrate the way in which the past lives of asylum seekers can very quickly lose currency as they find their way in a new place. Instead of building on past experiences and achievements for personal development, those experiences become 'wasted' when individuals have no choice but to flee their home countries and leave past lives behind. Sahar is one of many millions of displaced individuals across the globe who experience such loss; at the end of 2021, 89.3 million people were forcibly displaced globally which is the highest number ever recorded (UNHCR 2022). While almost half of these forced migrants are internally displaced and still live in their country of origin, 27.1 million are classed as refugees under the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) mandate. The UK currently only hosts one per cent of the world's forced migrants (Sodha 2021).

Forced migrants face all sorts of adversities and challenges, including after they have fled their home countries. Following arrival further hardships persist including discrimination, social isolation, and a general lack of opportunities in the host society such as the inability to work. Despite imposed restrictions on the everyday lives of refugees and asylum seekers, they are often considered to be entirely responsible for their position and so there is a tendency to pathologise hardships as being inherent to individuals rather than something that is connected to structural deficiencies. Resilience research is often preoccupied with the 'individualised nature of adaptation' (Bottrell 2009, 336), rather than challenging the social context in which individual experiences take place. Collective experiences of adversities, even if they are the effects of policies, thus bring to the fore the ways in which structures within which individuals are embedded are constitutive of resilience. If resilience is a consequence of limiting social structures, showing agency to respond to adversities and challenges may thus become an integral part of the everyday lives of some groups within society (Lenette, Brough, and Cox 2013). This warrants an exploration of the nuanced ways in which individuals show agency and resilience in these disabling structures.

Forced migrants' traumatic experiences are often underpinned by national policy discourses aimed at restricting immigration and by a failure to recognise others as deserving of equal treatment. Dispersal, detention, and deportation are used as tools to control immigration in the UK, contributing to a representation of certain groups of migrants as a threat, feeding the 'exclusionary logic' evident in such restrictive policies (Bloch and Schuster 2005). There is evidence of the negative impact of no-choice dispersal policies for asylum seekers in the UK as it can lead to a lack of trust in institutions and political processes, and can ultimately hinder long-term resettlement processes (Hynes 2009). Mayblin, Wake, and Kazemi (2020), in their study on the everyday experiences of asylum seekers in the UK, point out that 'hierarchical conceptions of human worth' (120) are present in UK asylum support policies that are premised on unequal recognition of different social groups in society. This is made visible through a range of measures including minimal levels of welfare support. Asylum seekers are gradually, and intentionally wounded as a consequence of enduring restrictions embedded in immigration policies (Mayblin, Wake, and Kazemi 2020).

Emerging relations between those seeking asylum and the host society are constantly evolving and are very context-dependent. Charles Taylor has convincingly argued that to be denied appropriate social recognition is to potentially cause 'real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning

or contemptible picture of themselves' (Taylor 1994, 25; see also Zetter 1991; 2007). This closely links with concepts of identity and identification, which is broadly defined by Jenkins (2014) as the capacity to know who one is, including knowing one's place within the world, and others knowing and seeing one's identity. Interruption in a preferred identity arises between internal standards, subjective meanings, and external factors of the environment including others' perceptions, socio-political setting, and availability of resources (Burke 1991; Stets and Burke 2005; Thoits 1991). Identity theorists show that events connected to identity disruption are more likely to cause anxiety than any other life events (Burke 1991; Thoits 1991).

Identities of refugees and asylum seekers are heavily dependent on the host society as the way that their identities are formed is partly controlled by it (Celebi, Verkuyten, and Bagci 2017; Zetter 1991). Stereotypes and bureaucratically imposed identities replace, form and transform individual identities. Labels are used, based on assumptions about 'normal' and 'lawful' forms of mobility or in relation to who is 'deserving' and 'undeserving' of protection so that individuals feel their impact beyond the 'state politicking' (Sajjad 2018; Thomaz 2018). Similarly, crisis-based and derogatory identities, or identities 'characterised by a certain level of "hardship"' and social exclusion (Zetter 1991; Thomaz 2018, 208; Pethig et al. 2017) are given to refugees and asylum seekers. This excludes forced migrants from being recognised as human, instead they are described as 'zombies', 'werewolves', or 'bandits' and are left with a feeling of humiliation and a loss of dignity (Diken 2004, 87–88). Being forced to live with assigned identities (Pethig et al. 2017; Zetter 1991) causes damage to individuals, as identified by Taylor (1994). There are also very real material implications for the individuals concerned including limits on their ability to access basic needs like food and shelter, and the labour market due to their status as less deserving. In other words, practices of labelling undermine individuals' agency as it is implied that they cannot lead a self-determined life, and so their actions are curtailed (Krause and Schmidt 2018).

Some have generally argued for a more prominent role of resilience in refugee resettlement (Dubus 2018). Lenette, Brough, and Cox (2013) take it further by arguing that because social structures are lacking, resilience becomes part of refugees' everyday realities, it is a necessary part of what it is to be a refugee. We believe that this in itself offers a compelling reason for understanding personal and structural resilience as it offers us a window into the everyday lives of this marginalised social group. Resilience has been identified as 'ordinary magic' (Masten 2001), but it has also been critiqued as being a form of neoliberal governmentality, in which individuals are responsible for their own well-being (Joseph 2013; Mohaupt 2008). Research has also shown how resilience can be about more than the legitimisation of neoliberal governance, being used as a tool by migrants to resist, to survive and to push back against unequal treatment (Papadopoulos, Fratsea, and Mavrommatis 2018; Reid 2019; Van Es, Rommes, and De Kwaadsteniet 2021). Resilience understood in this way reflects agency and suggests that individuals are able to employ creative strategies to, as Katz (2004, p. x) puts it, not only to 'stay afloat' but even to reframe the possibilities for their lives. Resilience is the capacity of a system (individual, community, ecosystem) to respond to ongoing change and either return to a state where the original function is maintained or even improved. Thus, systems bounce back or bounce forward, depending on the response to change (Imperiale and Vanclay 2016). In being resilient, individuals are able to assert their identities and be recognised

for who they wish to be; resilience and identity are therefore closely connected. We want to further explore migrants' resilience in a context where social recognition is lacking, identities are disrupted, and self-esteem is potentially undermined. Rather than focusing only on 'everyday resilience' (Lenette, Brough, and Cox 2013), we follow Krause and Schmidt's (2018) thesis that temporalities are important for individual agency, and Walsh-Dilley and Wolford (2015) who emphasise the importance of personal perspectives in understanding resilience. We do so by focusing on refugees' past, present and future as a means of understanding how, in a context where identity recognition is potentially lacking, resilience may be undermined. We ask: how do forced migrants adapt to their newfound circumstances and how are identities impacted in this process? In exploring the role of identities in resilience processes we link the concepts of resilience and identity and we examine the impact of identity disruption on individuals' agency, i.e. their capacity to act. In so doing we contribute to critical research on forced migration by providing a more subjective approach to understanding resilience and the everyday lives of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. By bringing forced migrants' voices into the picture we draw attention to the importance of the interplay between social structures and individual agency. We also attend to Brahic and Lallement's (2020) critique of binary approaches to resilience which do not take account of nuanced personal experiences. Our data is drawn from a research project that examined refugees' and asylum seekers' perception of themselves.

This article is structured as follows: we present the context of forced migration in the UK before going on to critically review the resilience literature. Following that, we present the empirical study and the associated findings. We end by reflecting on the meaning of a subjective understanding of resilience.

### **1.1. Forced migration and context**

The immigration system in the UK is notoriously complex (The Law Commission 2020; Griffiths and Yeo 2021). In a very general sense, individuals who are forced to flee their home countries either embark on a dangerous journey to come to the UK and claim asylum; or they are resettled to the UK as already recognised refugees (for an overview of UK resettlement policies and schemes, see Home Office 2021). These two different modes of arrival are often distinguished by the UK government as 'legal' and 'illegal' routes, and subsequently those who arrive on 'illegal' routes are then labelled and criminalised as 'illegal migrants'; regardless of the fact that no human being is illegal (Baldacchino and Sammut 2016; Johnston 2019). For some groups (e.g. Ukrainian refugees) schemes exist which, although also imperfect, give those refugees rights which are not available to other forced migrants, for example, the right to work; or 'safe passage' (Boyle 2022). The distinction between these two different routes of arriving has created what Flug and Hussein (2019) describe as a two-tier asylum system, based on the different support asylum seekers and resettled refugees receive.

More recently, the debate around the UK's Nationality and Borders Act (2022) (dubbed by refugee-supporting charities, the Anti-Refugee Bill (Refugee Action 2021)), has highlighted that more punitive measures for people seeking safety in the UK will continue to criminalise those who flee war, violence and persecution. While many charities and advocacy groups were very outspoken in condemning the UK's plans under the new

Act, they also increasingly play a role in filling the gaps left by the state to provide for the essential living needs of asylum seekers and refugees (DeVerteuil 2017; Mayblin and James 2019). This mirrors a wider role that has emerged within third-sector organisations in reducing the inequalities often created through government policies (Carella, Gurrieri, and Lorizio 2007), instead of challenging or contesting existing structures (Shortall and McAreavey 2017).

Intensifying an already existing status hierarchy within the asylum system that has characterised migration policy in the UK for many decades (Patel 2021), immigration policy has shifted towards a 'hostile environment'. This has resulted in a more restrictive migration regime for many migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers (Goodfellow 2020) with the overall aim of ultimately making the UK unattractive to refugees and asylum seekers (Griffiths and Yeo 2021). Such policies stipulate where asylum seekers are housed when they arrive in the UK. Accommodation includes former army barracks, hotels and substandard housing in some of the most deprived areas of the UK (Grierson 2021; Phillips 2006). Consequently, many individuals are confined to a state of limbo for multiple years. It is in these precarious circumstances and through the unequal recognition of different social groups including forced migrants, that identity negotiations and formations take place (Jenkins 2000). Exclusion from the labour market prohibits forced migrants more widely from full participation in society, creating 'vulnerabilities to poverty and destitution' (Mayblin and James 2019, 391). These circumstances are not necessarily conducive to settling into a new place, the construction of a 'coherent narrative about oneself and one's experiences' impacting on individuals' ability to create a sense of belonging and home (Eastmond 2007, 255).

## 1.2. Resilience

There is no single definition of resilience; so malleable is the concept that Humbert and Joseph (2019) argue that the meaning assigned to it differs across different disciplines. Indeed, since its introduction in the 1970s by CS Holling (Holling 1973), it has been used across a range of disciplines to examine ecological, community and individual responses to externally driven change including spatial planning (Davoudi 2012); social geography (e.g. Quinn et al. 2021); rural development (e.g. McAreavey 2022); and within social psychology and medical science (Southwick et al. 2014). Resilience can result in successful resistance to external shocks; adaptation involving adjustment and compromise; or innovation (Bouchard 2013). The latter, a more radical view, focuses on transformation, prevention and building strength (Chandler 2014; Southwick et al. 2014). Others go further and suggest that resilience occurs in the face of adversity or crisis (Humbert and Joseph 2019). It may be slow-moving, barely visible and not necessarily a dramatic external event (Wandji 2019), it could include changes in identity, culture and values (Michelsen and De Orellana 2019).

Refugee support workers often advocate for resilience as a goal for resettlement programmes (Dubus 2018; Hutchinson and Dorsett 2019). As such, resilience is considered a 'good thing' and as we argue above, it closely connects to identity, allowing individuals to 'bounce back', avoid identity disruption and to be who they want to be. In this way, time also plays a role as past identities are lived in the present. It is often assumed that forced migrants are resilient in the face of negative experiences or trauma, and that they have

levels of inherent or adaptive capacity (Cuthill 2017; Uekusa and Matthewman 2017). In this article, we follow Krause and Schmidt (2018) who recognise the relevance of different temporalities for individuals' agency in regaining a sense of stability and security when they respond to change. Refugee support workers interviewed by Dubus (2018) describe resilience as being visible in individual behaviours rendering them able to 'function' as they did before events that forced them to flee their home countries (421). In other words, resilience entails bouncing back, i.e. having the capacity to act and achieving continuity between past, present and future.

Social support, religious faith, education and employment opportunities, and access to equal rights and justice have been found to enhance resilience whereas language barriers, discrimination, labelling and isolation are counterproductive (Hutchinson and Dorsett 2019; Krause and Schmidt 2020; Liebenberg and Pelley 2020; Schweitzer, Greenslade, and Kagee 2007; Sherwood and Liebling-Kalifani 2012). But it is worth noting that support services may continue practices where individual experiences, needs and aspirations are assumed when, for example, advocacy groups postulate often stereotyped identities of migrants and push them into certain jobs (Shortall and McAreavey 2017). For many refugees and asylum seekers, access to supporting resources can be limited, for example, due to legal restrictions to work, financial limitations to study, or isolation due to being housed in secluded areas without access to support groups and social networks, and reliance on unaffordable public transport. Accordingly, critical scholarship points to underlying structural inequalities in certain policies and support systems, raising further questions about responsibilities and who is able to respond to circumstances. Mavelli (2019) places responsibility squarely with social structures, criticising the idea that debasement, poverty and destitution are the fault of individuals who are unable to deal with modern life. This links with Bottrell's (2009) position on the role of social structures in creating disadvantages.

We recognise resilience as an active social process, based on relationships and embedded in the wider individual and social environment, including institutions and policies (Pulvirenti and Mason 2011), all of which influence individuals' capacities to act. It is an 'ongoing and dynamic process of adaptation' (Bottrell 2007, 600) rather than a static trait which allows individuals to realise their preferred identities. We understand that resilience is negatively affected when certain valued identities appear to be compromised and cannot be enacted (after Sherwood and Liebling-Kalifani 2012). Identities can therefore facilitate the resilience process or can be an expression of resilience, as they emerge from recognition struggles.

## 2. Methodology

The data presented here was collected in May 2019 as part of a research project led by Raphaela Berding-Barwick and involved twelve participants with experience of forced migration. Using photo-elicitation the aim of the study was to explore how they constitute their social identities. Ethical approval for this research project was given by Newcastle University. After an initial briefing interview, participants were given prompts according to which they took photographs over the course of two weeks. These were then discussed in individual elicitation interviews (Rose 2016). Apart from introductory questions, such as 'What do the photographs show?' or 'What do the photographs mean?'

interviews were not structured and were guided by participants' photos. All interviews were conducted without interpreters. Participants' were central to the research process and their interpretations guided the research.

Participant recruitment was facilitated by a network built through long-term volunteering with refugee-supporting agencies. Instead of a lengthy process of identifying gatekeepers involving meetings and discussions about the research (Bloch 1999), good relations with staff from these agencies facilitated their involvement. Raphaela Berding-Barwick had met some participants before through her voluntary activity and had established trusting relations. Additionally, gatekeepers with long-established relations in the community served as an additional bridge between the researcher and target group, encouraging participation (Kabranian-Melkonian 2015).

Participants were sampled using non-probability sampling. Smith (2009, 66) points out that random sampling is 'nearly impossible' in refugee communities, and instead of having many participants, it is important to gain the trust of 'a few reliable informants' to receive information. In addition, significant time and financial constraints did not allow for a lengthy sampling process.

Raphaela Berding-Barwick initially recruited 16 participants, of which four subsequently dropped out. Twelve respondents submitted their photos and were interviewed afterwards to find out about their identity-constitution processes. With participants' consent, interviews were transcribed and anonymised, assigning pseudonyms selected by participants. Transcripts were read and re-read to allow for inductive analysis and resulting in the emergence of themes and sub-themes, ensuring that participants' voices and their subjectivities were heard (Grbich 2012).

To ensure a deep engagement with individual stories, this article focuses on the accounts of three Iranian forced migrants, two of whom were refugees (Gandom and Meti), and one an asylum seeker (Sahar) at the time of the interview.

### 3. Data

In this section we present the accounts of three research participants. For each individual, we first build an understanding of their valued identities and how they influence the perception of present barriers in realising personal future dreams and ambitions. We then explore their personal experiences of resilience, whether outcomes are more positive than before, and how the affirmation and recognition of preferred identities impact on this process (Sherwood and Liebling-Kalifani 2012; Taylor 1994). In doing so, we account for the past, present and future dimensions of personal experiences.

#### 3.1. Gandom

##### 3.1.1. *Understanding who she is*

Gandom is in her early 30s. She came to the UK in 2018 and got refugee status granted less than six months after she first claimed asylum. Gandom is an experienced qualified accountant and in Iran was a women's rights activist. During the interview, she repeatedly condemned Islam as being unfair towards women. She converted to Christianity, which is considered a crime in Iran, and so she was targeted and detained by the Iranian police. This ultimately led her to flee and seek refuge in the UK.



Gandom described herself as being ‘very optimistic’, stating ‘I never ever give up, I just continue my effort’, ‘I am adventurous. I am a risk taker [...]’. This is my character, I really love risk’, and ‘nobody can stop me’. Growing up in a patriarchal society, Gandom faced adversities and unequal treatment early on in her life because of her gender, including from her own brothers who, for example, never allowed her to ride their motorcycle. This led her to develop an attitude where she generally does not accept ‘no’ as an answer, and which she has incorporated into her identity:

I don’t like some people told me ‘no you are a girl, so you are not able to do this or that’. I hate these sentences. This is a kind of my character. I cannot accept any limitation or any strict things that you cannot do this or cannot do that, no, I am a human so I can do everything that I want.

Gandom’s self-understanding as someone who does not accept ‘no’ as an answer emerged from recognition struggles when she was younger (Taylor 1994). This aspect of her identity is an expression of her resilience as it developed from pushing back against unequal treatment in the past. She upholds this part of her identity in the present, constantly expressing it. Gandom also spoke about other aspects of her identity. Her hobbies play a role in this, as Gandom found resources in the things that she likes and that she is interested in. For example, she described herself as a ‘swimming lover’, and she affirmed this with a description of how she felt when she was swimming:

When I am in the water, I don’t think about my problems I don’t think about my challenge, nothing, I am just happy and I live on that moment, not about the past or the future just I live on that moment, so it makes me happy.

Gandom continues to swim regularly, using it as a strategy for dealing with adversities, such as feeling down. In making the decision to go swimming, Gandom showcases agency and forgets about the everyday struggles she has as a refugee in the UK.

While Gandom spoke about the positive effect of swimming, the question arises whether she could draw on this to improve and build on her capacity to act, or whether she was struggling to make progress. Her outlook of the future was optimistic and she spoke very positively about being in the UK, believing that ‘now I am in freedom, I am out of the border of Iran and now I can do everything that I was ambitious about’. For Gandom, swimming can be considered ‘ordinary magic’ (Masten 2001), a resource to assert her identity. But the degree to which it would result in improvement and allow her to achieve her ambitions requires further exploration.

### *3.1.2. Personal experiences of resilience*

Although Gandom’s attitude was very positive and optimistic, she still faced barriers. These related to those aspects of her identity associated with her love for swimming and opportunities she sought to further get recognition in continuing to do things she did in Iran. Gandom enquired at her local swimming pool about whether she would be allowed to teach with her Iranian certificate for teaching children to swim. She was told that she needed to enrol in a course in the UK as the certificate was not recognised. Thus Gandom’s capacity to get on with her everyday life was curtailed. She did not have adequate resources to overcome this challenge as she did not have the financial means to

pay for a course to become a certified swimming teacher in the UK. Gandom similarly comments on her ambition to go to university:

First of all, I should pass a course in English language [...]. I don't know if they accept my Bachelor from Iran or not, I should ask the University.

To start University, Gandom needed to pass an English language course, and it was not clear whether her degree from her home country would be recognised. While she wanted to take responsibility for her own well-being by becoming a swimming teacher and continuing her education, her actions were curtailed. Bureaucratic hurdles and lack of financial resources to pay for a course prevented her from improving her circumstances. As such, her response was not one of concrete action but rather she engaged in waiting as a form of agency to regain a sense of stability in the future (by becoming a swimming teacher again and attending University) (Krause and Schmidt 2018). Accepting that she had to wait was facilitated by Gandom's circumstances, in particular that she already had refugee status and was not in a state of limbo anymore, similar to asylum seekers who often wait years for a decision on their claim (Kits 2005). In a way, then, her circumstances provided a resource allowing her to make the decision to wait. Even though Gandom pro-actively decided to wait in the hope that at some point in the near future she could enrol in a swimming course, it is unclear if she would ever have the financial resources and related resilience to overcome the structural obstacles in her way. Gandom's case study indicates how resilience traits interact with external factors (i.e. social structures and materiality). While she could momentarily forget about personal adversities through swimming, her capacity to act was ultimately limited by insufficient funds. This to a degree had an isolating effect, limiting the circumstances when she could fully participate in the society in which she was living. Even so, she remained connected to her historical identity as a swimming instructor and paradoxically the traits that Krause and Schmidt (2020) identify as impeding resilience (e.g. isolation, labelling) seemed to propel Gandom's personal resilience.

### 3.2. *Meti*

#### 3.2.1. *Understanding who he is*

Meti is in his 40s, and he arrived in the UK in 2018. In Iran, he ran his own recycling business. Throughout the interview, Meti presented himself as being a creative and ingenuous man. On several occasions, he showed photographs on his phone of how he creatively used and re-purposed different food containers, such as re-using old ice cream boxes for food storage, or how he used empty milk bottles as bins. Through this, he asserted his identity as someone who made his living from finding new uses for old things from the past, all of which affirmed his self-understanding as a creative person.

Meti repeatedly said that his success was due to his hard work, and self-reliance. He said that 'I want to be useful for myself and I don't want to be waste my money and I want to [...] solve my problems'. In explaining how his identity was shaped, he specifically drew on his experience of the military service:

About two years I've been in army for duty in my country, and it was very bad situation and very good for me. Very good experience from this. Because I believe bad situation and very

hard situation, condition, make the man to face with other problems in the life. It's very good. [...] I am very alone here without any help and its very good for me because it depends on myself.

Similar to Gandom then, Meti's identity emerged from his experiences of adversities and challenges he faced in Iran. In fact, Meti said that he liked the 'hard situation, it's good' and he considers the isolation he experiences in the UK as something of a tool allowing him to depend on himself.

### *3.2.2. Personal experiences of resilience*

Meti was able to act upon challenges such as the lack of money to buy food storage containers and was also able to assert his identity as a recycling entrepreneur through repurposing plastic containers. Doing this allowed his past to remain in the present and this minimised identity disruption. However, it remains unclear if Meti was able to improve his circumstances in the long term. Similar to Gandom, Meti was ambitious for his future including building a similar business in the UK to that which he had in Iran. Driven by this aspiration, he knew that he needed to acquire a certain level of English language proficiency, and to build capital before he could start his own business:

I think here is a free country if I can learn English, I can make some opportunity of work and new things and a new idea. But it's very difficult. [...] For work it depends on myself, to learn English and to show my ability to the manager and make money after that make company. I think it takes five or six years.

Like Gandom, Meti faced structural adversities to realise his ambition of running his own business, to continue what he did in Iran. Meti knew that he lacked sufficient financial resources and English skills to do this, and he knew that it would take time to overcome these barriers. He believed that his success depended on his personal actions, but his capacity to act was limited. Despite this, he decided to learn English (by himself), and to wait until he reached sufficient language proficiency and built enough starting capital for his own business; rather than seek help elsewhere and escape isolation. However, similar to Gandom's experience, 'waiting' was not necessarily a conscious act to regain a sense of stability and to ensure improved circumstances for the future. Instead, it was imposed on him through a lack of choice to do anything else, indicating a very limited capacity to act due to structural constraints. Ultimately, Meti had personal resources available in the form of sufficient educational capital to teach himself English which allowed him to wait.

The ambition to build his own business was a long-term endeavour and required long-term strategies which for the moment resulted in waiting and learning English. Despite being limited in achieving this long-term goal and improving his situation, there was evidence of Meti having the capacity to act and achieving successful outcomes when facing adversity. These were personal rather than only structural, and for Meti these successes aligned with how he perceived himself, and his interests. Therefore, Meti recalled a memory from his shared asylum-seeker accommodation:

In the shared house, it's very bad, we have nothing and call with them [the management] and they didn't care about that, so I had to make something by myself.

Meti referred to a lack of simple household items, such as storage containers, saltshakers, bins, or a lack of storage space for his personal belongings. He had to solve this problem by himself, as those responsible for managing the accommodation did not provide enough kitchen items to, for example, store leftover food. His experience of self-reliance generated solutions. At the same time, his self-identification as a creative man, and the experiences he brought with him from owning a recycling business, enabled him to live up to the expectations he had created of himself and thus to find recognition for his identity.

Meti referred back to past experiences as part of his capacity to exist in the present by applying the skills he had previously learned. But it was clear that those previous experiences afforded him the resilience to gather resources that would eventually allow him to function as he did before the events that forced him to flee his home country. As with the case of Gandom, it was curious that the language barrier and the isolation experienced by Meti equipped him with resilience as it motivated him to overcome impediments to positively adapting to his new environments. His choices to act were significantly curtailed due to various exclusions from social structures, but despite that he identified pathways for actions that contributed to building up resilience.

### **3.3. Sahar**

#### **3.3.1. Understanding who he is**

Sahar did not have refugee status at the time of the interview. He was an asylum seeker in his late 20s and was living with his brother while he was waiting for a decision on his status. Sahar was living off his savings, which were almost finished at the time of the interview. The conversation with him was very focused on his circumstances, defined by the wait for a decision on his status. He said that 'I've been here about six months and I am waiting for my interview and it hasn't happened. So [...] I am really waiting for it every day'. For Gandom and Meti waiting could be seen as a conscious act, or a strategic choice, with the objective to assert their preferred identities in the future as they expected to achieve upward social mobility in the future. This had been achieved partially because they were able to live a little in the present, while drawing on their past identities. This allowed them to achieve a sense of continuity with the past and contributed to their resilience. However, Sahar's capacity to live in the present was significantly curtailed as he was forced to wait for the outcome of his legal status and so waiting was the only option he had. Rather than acting upon his circumstances, Sahar was reacting to them, having only a few resources available as an asylum seeker who was caught in limbo (Kits 2005). Put at its simplest, his past life was not recognised by the host society.

Similar to Gandom and Meti, Sahar drew on his past experiences to describe who he was. He spoke about his University degree in 'electricity' from which he graduated 'with a good score' despite it being a difficult field, and that he 'went to military service'. Sahar's intention to assert his identity as an educated man was also visible in the way he dressed for the interview. While it was a rather informal encounter, Sahar came dressed in a shirt, dress shoes and suit trousers. However, in contrast to Gandom and Meti, the social structures did not fully allow him to properly exist in the present in anything like a meaningful way.

### 3.3.2. *Personal experiences of resilience*

After Sahar spoke about his achievements which contributed to his self-understanding, he then talked about his experiences of not being recognised as a University graduate, or as someone from a higher-class background.

Some people judge us as asylum seekers, or refugees, it can be quite annoying. Because I think in my previous life my life wasn't like this, it was better. I had a good life. [...] For example, some people ask me 'have you ever seen a car?' I answered, of course I had a very good car when I was in my country. I was educated in a very good field, I don't want to be judged, without any information. And I just want to mention, some people are just judging us by looking at us. And the feeling is quite annoying when you think people, even government, are looking at you everywhere. [...] I don't say it's not fair, of course it is because they don't know who we are really and so maybe they have to do it.

Although Sahar was able to respond to some of the judgement from others, he did not have the resources available to assert his identity; unlike Gandom who momentarily improved her circumstances by going swimming and Meti who found recognition for his identity in recycling food containers. Instead, Sahar said that

I did all of them [studies and military service] because I wanted to have a very clear future. But at the moment, I guess, I just need to leave all of them. I just think they are useless now, and what I have done, in my previous life, it's wasted.

Sahar was not able to make sense of his past experiences from which he built his self-understanding, and he could not find a connection between them and the present, or how they could help him re-build his life and improve his circumstances in the UK. While Gandom's and Meti's achievements from the past were drivers for their ambition in the present and for the future, for Sahar they were a reminder of his life being interrupted, evoking feelings of his previous life being wasted and of a lost identity. His response to his circumstance was that he felt he lost everything, and thus to paraphrase Taylor (1994) as he was denied appropriate social recognition, this resulted in real personal damage.

Sahar was very desperate about his situation, being aware of the adversities and struggles he was facing, with only minimal capacity to act. At first, Sahar tried to downplay the negative experiences of judgement from others. For example, on the feeling of being watched and judged for 'every single thing', he said it was 'annoying'. It appears Sahar dismissed the judgement he faced from different sides. Although he was unable to imagine a future based on his past experiences and achievements, knowing that he was educated was a resource for him to resist ascribed identities. However, the interview took a turn, as he got upset and he changed the tone of the language he used to speak about how he felt:

I am so sad. I just see myself, really, I lost everything.

It is this quote which is most indicative that Sahar might have given up. He did not see himself as having the capacity to make choices, or act, other than going to a cemetery to cry, this in isolation from others. Although we spoke about his past experiences, they did not provide him with anything which could resemble a resilience process. Instead, they undermined it because Sahar did not experience recognition for his identity which was

built on these achievements from the past. His identity was ruptured, with his present sense of who he was being dislocated from his past.

It was difficult for Sahar to find resources to enhance his resilience, such as through social networks. Although he was living with his brother, he still felt alone, isolated even. Yet, when speaking about his experiences as an asylum seeker, he indicated that he considered himself as part of that community: ‘when I speak with other asylum seekers I found out they are like me’. Although they might not form part of his social network, Sahar’s own words suggest that he found comfort in this collective experience, the collective struggle, of being an asylum seeker. This then might be a reason why, despite being desperate and seemingly consumed by the adversities and struggles he was facing, Sahar remained hopeful about his future, this positivity contributing to his personal resilience.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusion

Analysing accounts of three forced migrants, this article explored narratives of belonging and individual strategies of resilience in the context of the UK’s hostile environment. Here the state increasingly leaves individuals to deal with their own problems, failing to recognise underlying structural deficiencies. We specifically explored how the past informs individuals’ capacity to act and to be resilient in the face of personal and structural adversity.

We have shown how resilience can exist despite the prevalence of factors that previous studies have been found to be counterproductive to its formation i.e. language barriers, discrimination, labelling and isolation (see for instance Krause and Schmidt 2020; Sherwood and Liebling-Kalifani 2012). Resilience outcomes differ between individuals, depending, for example, on gender, ethnicity or socio-economic status (Mohaupt 2008). This study advances our understanding of resilience by showing that it is informed by different stages in an individual’s life and on wider social structures. The accounts shared in this article reflect part of refugees’ longer-term journey, and their desire to create coherence with their past lives, albeit in a new social and physical context. In recognising resilience processes amongst refugees and asylum seekers, time is clearly a critical factor acknowledged in past and present experiences, as well as future aspirations, so too are power relations and structural constraints. Resilience is contextual, it changes over time, and it is relational – individuals are resilient *to* something. Fundamentally, resilience is achieved when individuals feel connected to their identities, are able to exert agency, be whom they wish to be and feel recognition for this.

Rather than relying on external support, we showed that individuals relied on themselves in their responses to change. Gandom and Meti were able to draw on personal interests, experiences and knowledge to help them adapt to their newfound circumstances, including the emotional hardship that this entailed. But critically they were able to draw from their past lives, bring those into the present as a means of creating expectations about who they would be in the future. It is true that Sahar also adapted to adversities he faced, as indicated by the fact that he goes to a cemetery to cry, but he expressed a strong sense of identity disruption and a rupture in his personal narrative. Gandom and Meti showed agency, with the choices being made determined by wider social constraints and their own ambitions and plans, as well as personal interests and

self-identifications. These ranged from going swimming, to recycling kitchen containers, self-teaching English and making the choice to wait.

Krause and Schmidt (2018) argue that waiting can be seen as a conscious act; however, this study indicates that waiting resulted from having limited options to act, so it can be less about a conscious act and more about patiently enduring a situation. Waiting enacted in this way was less about agency and more about a lack of choice due to wider social structures, including exclusion from the labour market. While resilience can be achieved through 'ordinary achievements in everyday-ness' (Lenette, Brough, and Cox 2013, 648) for Gandom, Meti and Sahar, resilience was about fulfilling deeper identity needs that allowed them to remain connected to the past whilst living in the present, such as becoming a swimming coach or building a recycling business. Personal resilience is undermined if individual histories are somehow airbrushed from the present due to wider structures such as those enacted through the hostile environment.

The ways in which Gandom, Meti and Sahar evaluated waiting depended on their circumstances, and also on the extent to which circumstances in themselves could be used as a resource. Gandom and Meti already had refugee status, and so they could draw on this as a resource, knowing that they could stay in the UK and could start rebuilding their lives. Sahar, on the other hand, was extremely constrained in his actions as he was forced to wait for his asylum application to be processed. The uncertainty surrounding this wait left Sahar feeling desperate, and he demonstrated more despondency than Gandom and Meti. His legal status meant that he had access to much fewer resources, and his past experiences were disregarded, all of which impeded his capacity to act and adapt. His behaviour demonstrated severe identity disruption; he described his past experiences and achievements as being useless and this seemed to impede his personal resilience. Social structures were so constraining that they did not allow him to draw on his skills from the past to live in the present. He was not able to enact a coherent story about himself and this very clearly frustrated him and impacted on his sense of identity and of belonging. This was in sharp contrast to Gandom and Meti, both of whom had a clear and coherent narrative that they frequently rehearsed. Sahar did however have hope for the future, and drew on this rather than the past to enable him to adapt, echoing other findings in the literature which emphasise the role of hope as a source for strength and motivation (Yıldız 2020).

Even though the literature shows how discrimination, labelling, isolation and language barriers are amongst the factors that are counterproductive to being resilient, this study shows that despite these challenges individuals can still demonstrate resilience. Gandom, Meti and Sahar were all trying to achieve continuity and coherence and this in turn contributed to their resilience – their capacity to act and to adapt to present circumstances. Gandom's and Meti's past experiences had a positive contribution to this process. Gandom's identity to succeed was very clearly shaped by her experiences of being marginalised in a male-dominated society as she grew up. Meanwhile, Meti drew on his experiences in the military in developing resilience. Their respective experiences and achievements from their past lives served as a catalyst for having ambitions and dreams and as a guide in making concrete plans about what to do in the UK. Rather than doing things differently to what they did in their home countries, they tried to find similar resources, and build on their experiences from the past.

Like other individuals, refugees and asylum seekers have dreams and ambitions for their lives. Having capacity to enact those aspirations is important for the human psyche, it allows for recognition of individual identities. And yet an immigration system that seeks to delete an individual's past as if time were irrelevant can undermine personal resilience, it can hamper the capacity to act and to adapt. In not recognising and deleting past achievements, this system does not value forced migrants for who they are while supposedly giving them protection. Instead, the state fuels anti-immigration rhetoric for political gains to leave individuals feel unwelcome. This could be accounted for as part of the hostile environment which actively and deliberately seeks to make the UK an unattractive place in which to seek asylum. Despite the hostile environment, individuals such as Gandom and Meti are able to connect with their past and use that as part of the resilience process as they adapt to their new surroundings. However, wider social structures remain important and the limitations of this must be recognised in a context where individual capacity to participate fully in society remains restricted. Giving asylum seekers the right to work, recognising degrees and acknowledging professional skills and past experiences would be ways for policies to ensure that individuals' pasts are not erased but can be built on by individuals, allowing them to create a desired future.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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