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THE UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD

# The Illegal Human?

A Sociological Exploration into Professional's Perceptions of the Challenges Asylum Seekers Face in the UK and the Responsibility of the State.

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## Acknowledgements

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## Abstract

This research project aims to explore professional's perceptions of the challenges asylum seekers face. More specifically, it focuses on the lived experiences of asylum seekers and the daily harms they endure as a result of the state's asylum system, which is rooted in conflicting interpretations of human rights. A social justice approach is utilised that explores the state's dominant orientation to nationalist approaches over ideas of equal humanity. In addition, it seeks to explore professionals' proposals for social change that would ameliorate the everyday lives of asylum seekers.

This research's aims are achieved through a series of semi-structured interviews with professionals, either support workers or volunteers, who work alongside asylum seekers in their daily lives. The findings of this study conclude that professional's perceptions of the challenges asylum seekers face can be organised into interrelated categories. Practical disadvantages are initiated by the state's lack of funding for asylum seeker support provision, and produce high levels of poverty and social exclusion. Symbolic challenges arise from the internalisation of these disadvantages and these have detrimental consequences for asylum seekers' identity. Moreover, the government's policies are assumed to be discriminatory and stigmatise asylum seekers in the media and public eye, infringing on their human rights. Pragmatic paths to achieve social change were explored at the local and micro level, and solutions advocated local initiatives, including educational and inclusionary strategies, to challenge wider negative assumptions and ensure quality provision for asylum seeker support.

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Abbreviations

NASS - National Asylum Support Service

## Introduction

### 1.1 Introducing the Topic

Explorations into the challenges that asylum seekers face have received increasing scholarly attention with much research existing that documents the specific challenges they endure in their everyday lives. This has predominantly stemmed from the 1951 UN Refugee Convention that defines a refugee as:

> *'someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.' (UNHCR 2010, p. 3),*

with an asylum seeker being an individual who has applied for refugee protection and is waiting to be granted refugee status. These international conventions are crucial when analysing the current challenges faced by asylum seekers in the UK, as the UK's interpretation of their rights under these conventions constitutes an asylum seeker's experience (Chimineti and Solomos, 2016). At the international level, human rights are described as being rooted in the idea of equal humanity, whilst the nation-state interpretation of rights is based on citizenship, which asylum seekers find themselves external to (Tambini 2001; Donnelly 2007). Research can reveal how the challenges of asylum seekers are rooted in this conflict as asylum policy and practice stem from the UK's interpretation.

## 1.2 Existing Research

A preponderance of research into the challenges asylum seekers face has sought to explain them from the perspectives of asylum seekers themselves. Although this is an important viewpoint, the perceptions of professionals who support asylum seekers can be equally as valuable. Professionals' perceptions of these challenges shape the support they provide and they further possess an expert understanding of the current government's regime and how this manifests itself in the everyday challenges asylum seekers face. Additionally, although much research on this topic ends with policy recommendations and potential solutions, these are frequently developed solely by the researcher in response to their data collection, without collaboration with the participants in their study. In contrast, professionals who support asylum seekers are constantly adapting and developing responses to the difficulties that asylum seekers face - their foremost aim is to enhance the lived experiences of asylum seekers. Therefore, their voice and viewpoint in this area is an important addition to present research.

## 1.3 Aims and Overview of the Dissertation

This study is rooted in a social justice perspective, thus its primary aim is not only to explore the challenges faced by asylum seekers, but to propose ideas for social change that will enhance the lived experiences of asylum seekers, using the perceptions of professionals. Asylum seekers' challenges are framed within the current provision and approach of the government. This will be shown to be inextricably linked to the current government's orientation to social justice and nationalist approaches. Therefore, ideas for change will be realistic and pragmatic in the face of this regime.

A literature review will start by exploring the contested nature of asylum policy and its role in creating the current system in the UK before outlining the main studies and concepts used by academics to explain asylum seekers' challenges. Next, the research's methodology will be discussed, including further explanation of its theoretical framework, which aims to extend beyond the normative explanatory stance and include realistic ways to achieve social change, thus bridging the gap between research and activism. Finally, the findings and discussions of this study will be examined with existing literature, revealing any

parallels or disparities, concluding with recommendations for future research to build on this study's findings.

## Literature Review

## 2.1 Introduction

This dissertation recognises there are a myriad of challenges faced by asylum seekers whilst residing in the UK, and that each asylum seeker has an individualised experience due to a whole range of factors. However, this literature review attempts to organise their challenges into two key categories to capture their experience, whilst acknowledging that these challenges are not mutually exclusive and interact with each other. The first section will examine the nature of asylum seekers in the UK, and the second, their marginalization by the state through several processes.

## 2.2 The Nature of Asylum Seekers in the UK
## 2.2.1 Trends in the UK

It is important to recognise the trends of asylum seekers in the UK, as their nationality and reasons for seeking asylum influences their experiences. Statistics state that asylum seekers in the UK constitute a minority of the population, with reports asserting that in 2019, an estimated 0.6% of the population had originally relocated to the UK through seeking asylum,

and 56% of those had been residents in the UK for more than sixteen years (Walsh, 2020). The majority of asylum seekers are forced from their home countries due to political or military conflicts, including all-out civil wars, persecution based on ethnic or religious grounds, or through associations with groups seen to undermine the hierarchy of power. Within the UK, the 2019 statistics show the top five countries of nationality for asylum seeker applicants were Iran, Albania, Iraq, Eritrea, and Pakistan (Walsh, 2020).
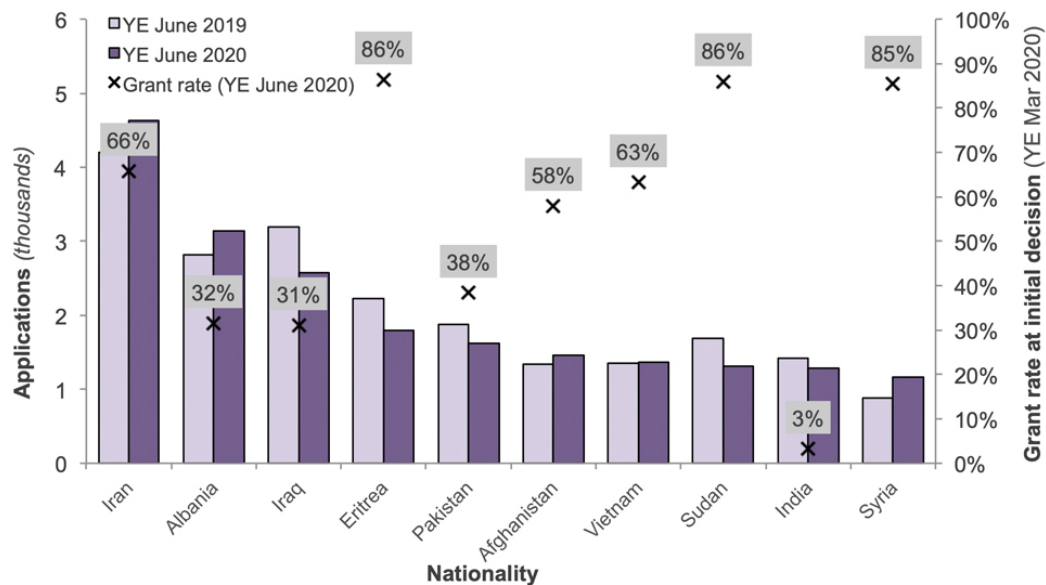


The graph above displays this, along with the *grant rate at initial decision*, which refers to granting refugee status or forms of leave (Home Office, 2020). Notably, there are relatively low levels of asylum seekers being granted refugee status at initial decision, particularly from the countries with the most applicants, such as Albania and Iraq. This may reflect the government's widely-held assumption that a high proportion of asylum seeker's claims are 'bogus' and they make a rational choice to travel to the UK with respect to certain 'pull factors'. This is in contrast with research into the flows of asylum seekers in Europe being characterised by war and conflict: it is these 'push factors' that ultimately are decisive for seeking asylum (Middleton, 2005).

In recent years, the time taken for asylum seekers to gain an initial decision on their application has increased considerably, with those receiving a decision in six months decreasing from 87% in 2014, to 20% in 2019. As of June 2020, approximately 54,000 people were awaiting an initial decision on their claim to asylum (Walsh, 2020). Therefore, this research is all the more necessary when acknowledging the extensive periods that many

are without a decision, as without the status of refugee, asylum seekers are continually deprived of many rights that accompany it.

## 2.2.2 Asylum Law and Policy

Explanations as to how the current cohort of asylum seekers in the UK has emerged and why they face challenges as a result of their asylum status predominantly revolve around the conflicting relationships in international, EU and UK asylum law and policy, based on differing ideas about entitlement to rights (Chimineti and Solomos, 2016). Literature in this area is based on international human rights, including the notable work of Hannah Arednt who believes everyone has a "moral claim to membership and certain forms of treatment compatible with the claim to membership" (Benhabib 2012, p. 56). However, challenges arise for asylum seekers as their status is dependent on the recognition of the nation-state where one resides. Asylum seekers are by definition not recognised by the state, and therefore this loss of nationality is seen as tantamount to the loss of all rights (Benhabib, 2012). Nevertheless, Arendt's writings can be seen as limited in their application to the contemporary UK, as they focused on 'stateless' political refugees, who had lost their nationality, as opposed to asylum seekers, who occupy a more ambiguous position. The view of membership as a prerequisite for human rights is challenged by contemporary academics, who argue that international conventions and agreements dictate a certain response to asylum seekers, and they are partially included within the host society, resulting in a system of stratified rights (Mayblin, 2016).

Upholding of international human rights comes into question when regarding the effects of the 1990 Dublin Convention, which the EU argues tries to identify which states should be responsible for examining an asylum claim. They stipulate that the original country asylum seekers enter should hold this responsibility, to prevent 'asylum shopping', where individuals seek out the most attractive regime (Department for UK Visas and Immigration, 2020). The underpinning assumption is that asylum seekers have detailed knowledge of the asylum systems in European countries, thus making informed choices based on the receptive conditions and potential for economic prosperity (Robinson and Segrott, 2002). However, in reality, the Dublin regulation has been incredibly partisan to border countries of the EU, where asylum seekers are most likely to enter first, including Italy, Greece and Spain. These countries have deteriorating economic climates, and cannot provide adequate levels of receptiveness for asylum seekers. The resultant overcrowding and the

failure of these countries to cope has advanced the media myth of an asylum seeker 'invasion' in the UK that will devastate the economy, contributing to the ascendance of anti-immigrant rhetoric and restrictive policies (Mouzourakis, 2014).

There is an academic consensus that the current UK's system has further undermined international rights principles, as the end of the Cold War meant refugees no longer possessed geopolitical and ideological value, and were socially constructed as substantially different in characteristics and numbers to previous cohorts, justifying new restrictive asylum policies (Chimni, 1998). This established the widely held assumption that asylum seekers aim to take advantage of the economic climate in the UK. Although Thielemann (2003) acknowledges economic considerations do play a part in the decision about where to apply for asylum, this is only applicable to a minority of asylum seekers. The proclaimed unknowability of these new asylum seekers' backgrounds and motives has meant that the UK effectively places them beyond the human rights framework, and until their position has been fully assessed, they are treated with a sustained suspicion (Malloch and Stanley, 2005).

Specific UK policies reveal the tenacity of this approach, such as the UK's sustained focus on voluntary repatriation, and the introduction of 'safe third countries' under the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act in 2002 (Zedner, 2010; Bosworth, 2008). This is argued to stem from the UK's interpretation of nation-state rights, which means their commitment to human rights depends on the ability to fit it within national frameworks and political realities (Shafir and Brysk, 2006). This impacts the government's grant rate at initial decision, and could explain the often low rates of leave granted to asylum seekers from countries deemed safe and those with the most applicants. Although Crawley (2010) calls for an adaption of asylum policy to be more understanding of the individual circumstances that force asylum seekers to leave their home countries, Chimienti and Solomos (2016) conclude that there is a limited ability for human rights to countermand nation-states decisions, as the autonomy of the state means right based frameworks cannot diverge from nation-state policies.

However, Spencer's (2018) research discusses how national governments do not bear exclusive responsibility for immigration controls, and local governments possess greater responsibility for social and economic policies, including public services. It is suggested that the restrictive asylum system can pose challenges for local authorities to fulfill their duties to all, such as protecting public health, reducing street homelessness, preventing crime, and

establishing community cohesion. Therefore, it is argued they are often pragmatic in developing solutions at a local level which avoids conflict with the government but allows for a level of inclusion for asylum seekers. This reflects Parekh's (2000) call for the increased accessibility of services for asylum seekers which should be culturally adaptive to these communities. With this in mind, although this research is unlikely to impact nation-state policies, it hopes to reveal the impacts of a nationalist asylum system and propose changes at the local and micro-level that would amplify social justice to improve the lives of asylum seekers and the communities that surround them.

## 2.3 Marginalisation by the State

### 2.3.1 Integration

The significant impact of the UK's asylum system on the everyday lives of asylum seekers can be linked to lacking a sense of belonging in a society, which is essential for social cohesion (Shafir and Brysk, 2006). Literature relating to this revolves around integration, which Berry (1997) defines as preservation of original culture whilst engaging in daily interactions with others of the host community. However, there is a widespread disagreement over the meaning of integration, and when integration should begin, as the government limits integration policies to those who have been granted refugee status (Phillips, 2006). Integration challenges are significant, as unsuccessful integration can result in social exclusion and alienation. Successful integration is described as a two-way process that necessitates mutual compliance with accepting and adapting to each other's cultures (Phillimore and Goodson, 2006). However, the UK's commitment to this is questioned by its revival of nationalism, based on the exclusion of the 'undeserving' who do not economically contribute or abide by British cultural norms through processes of 'othering' (Bosworth, 2008). This can be seen as indicative of the 2012 'hostile environment' policies and Brexit, both of which were founded on and bred xenophobic attitudes, excluding asylum seekers on the grounds of cultural difference, as foreign cultures are perceived as incompatible with British culture (Garner, 2013).

Despite three-quarters of asylum seekers having an educational qualification and therefore a high potential to integrate and contribute to UK society, the 2002 Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act introduced measures that prohibited asylum seekers from participating in paid work (Bloch, 2002). There is a widespread consensus that a lack of work accompanied by a lack of rights to welfare support produces some of the most pivotal barriers to integration.

Phillimore and Goodson's (2006) study in deprived urban areas in the West Midlands focused on the skills and employment experiences of asylum seekers and refugees. Their conclusions revealed a correlation between unemployment and social exclusion. A lack of work provided fewer opportunities to learn English and to build confidence, and this economic and social exclusion was seen to create structural and emotional barriers to participation, as the constant insecurity created little incentives to build a new life (Bloch, 2002). However, this is not necessarily the case for all asylum seekers as there are often incidences of asylum seekers attempting to participate in UK life through volunteer work (Vickers, 2016).

In addition, Kirkwood et al (2016) suggest that National Asylum Support Service (NASS), and it's 'no-choice' dispersal program, disrupts asylum seeker's lives and has contributed to a hostile reception in host communities, as it disperses asylum seekers into severely economically deprived areas, where opportunities are low. The appearance of asylum seekers in an already deprived local community is seen as a threat to resources, impacting social cohesion. However, this research also revealed the potential for local communities to advocate and accept asylum seekers into their community, as education about the reality of asylum seekers' experiences can transform conceptions of them as a threat. Nonetheless, this study was based in Glasgow, which introduces spatial concerns about the applicability of this to English communities. Previous research by Sim and Bowes (2007) has revealed that the low levels of BAME communities specific to a Scottish context meant their politics had not been racialized like the UK's, resulting in a political consensus for the adoption of multiculturalism and integrative policies. This reveals the importance to consider geographical location as impactful on the experience of asylum seekers.

## 2.3.2 Wellbeing

Mayblin et al (2020) argue that policies of the restrictive asylum system have created a continuum of social violence, degrading asylum seeker's wellbeing. This includes enforced impoverishment through receiving only £37.75 per week in financial support: this figure is determined by what the poorest 10 per cent in the UK spend on essential items only per week, thus constituting the lowest amount to survive whilst living in poverty. These high poverty levels act as a form of slow violence that severely accentuates their trauma by producing anxiety and feelings of shame. The concepts of social suffering and symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2000) explain how individuals internalize these feelings that can often create barriers by limiting their agency through feeling unworthy of help and legitimising the

status quo. Further adversity, as a result of their response to original forms of suffering, creates double suffering that can have destructive consequences for their sense of identity (Frost and Hoggett, 2008).

In addition, the limits on integration strategies further contribute to their diminishing mental state, as these are deemed vital for asylum seekers' wellbeing (Phillipmore and Goodson, 2006). Schouler-Ocak (2015) emphasizes the poor physical and mental health of asylum seekers as a result: mental illness is twice as high amongst them compared to economic migrants. Significantly, research exists that vocalises how asylum seeker's health often deteriorates on arrival in the UK as a result of their everyday living in impoverished environments, and as a product of the perpetuating anxiety and stress that the UK asylum system produces. Physical illnesses can emerge as a result of medications they are prescribed to deal with these issues (Tomkow, 2020).

Nevertheless, social injustice is not experienced equally, and it is important to recognise the overlapping inequalities that produce multiple levels of injustice. Crenshaw (1991) posits the use of an intersectionality approach, an alternative narrative that expands the frames of discrimination to see how asylum seekers' experience can differ based on inter-related factors such as their race, gender, and nationality, which interlock and contribute to their levels of oppression.

## 2.3.3 Criminalisation

The criminalisation of asylum seekers is seen widely as a social construction. It is contingent on the process of definition and the actors involved in the labeling, and Bhatia (2015) asserts how it is the political and media discourses that label them a threat, increasingly indirectly through the expansion of criminal measures into the politics of immigration. Aliveriti (2012) states a 'crimmigration system' has been established, where criminalisation is used for regulatory and administrative purposes, such as the use of detention, which is perceived as one of the most criminalizing deterrence measures in the UK (Hassan, 2000). Hassan (2000) reveals the government legitimises this through arguing it reduces tensions in communities between citizens and asylum seekers, however, the act of detaining asylum seekers posits them in the same category as criminals, reinforcing the misconception that they are dishonest economic migrants and maintaining the hostility and suspicions towards them. Despite official criteria claiming detention should not be used for those whose claims have

not been considered, a culture of disbelief penetrates the whole system blurring the distinction between rejected asylum seeker claimants and those waiting on a decision, so in practice many detention centres extend their remit to detain those with ongoing cases (Malloch and Stanley, 2005). Furthermore, asylum seekers bear the burden of proof to demonstrate their precarious position (Hassan, 2000), and the inability to do so risks detention, undermining their safety and security.

Khan's (2012) study on media representations of asylum seekers proposes how the government and media sensationalise the threat of the asylum seeker with a disproportionate focus on crimes committed, or allegedly committed, by asylum seekers. They are demonized in the tabloid press through rhetoric that labels them 'sex offenders', 'asylum rapists', or categorized as 'bogus asylum seekers', which justifies the suspicion and harsh policies towards them. Although these incidents are not entirely fabricated, the media fail to disclose that these are isolated occurrences and not disproportionate to crimes committed by the UK public (Goodman and Speer, 2007). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the influence politicians have in media reporting, and they often diverge on their ideological orientation towards asylum seekers: the framing of asylum seekers, therefore, differs between media outlets, on the left-right political spectrum (Vestergaard, 2020).

The representations of asylum seekers through 'hostility themes', including the criminalisation of asylum seekers, are used to justify their exclusion (Leudar et al, 2008), and fail to acknowledge that asylum seekers are increasingly victims of racist abuse and violence (Malloch and Stanley, 2005). However, Wroe's (2018) research shows how attempts to refute the criminalising narrative around asylum seekers, by ascribing them 'victim' status, can be equally as damaging. This victimising humanitarian language can further dehumanise asylum seekers and sustain the 'us' and 'them' distinction (Lynn and Lea, 2003). Moreover, a focus on the vulnerability and victimhood of asylum seekers can undermine their ability to contribute and proliferate the myth that they will be a burden on public services (Crawley et al, 2016). Although victimising asylum seekers can be used as a tactic to transform public perceptions, it does little to promote effective political action and homogenizes asylum seekers' experiences (Wroe, 2018).

## 2.4 Conclusion

The paradoxical interaction between the UK's orientation towards social justice and the interests of the nation-state frames the challenges facing asylum seekers. The literature reveals a fundamental ambiguity in responses to asylum seekers, based on a moral conflict between an obligation towards shared humanity, and the privileges of the citizen that are underlined with nationalist ideals. However, there is dominant rhetoric that commitments to international human rights have been infringed by the state's alternative agendas. Understanding the lived experiences of these challenges is, therefore, significant to research, as it can exhibit the intended and unintended consequences of a restrictive asylum system, and begin to propose ideas for change that would enhance social justice for asylum seekers in their everyday lives.

## Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This research conducted six semi-structured interviews with professionals working with asylum seekers, including support workers and volunteers, with over one year's experience

in their role. This section seeks to explain the theoretical framework of this study with a focus on gaining a personal insight into professionals' perceptions of the challenges faced by asylum seekers, and their opinions on potential changes to alleviate these challenges. It will further delineate the methods used to achieve these aims and reflect on these research methods in practice.

## 3.2 Research Questions and Aims

1. What are the perceptions of professionals working alongside asylum seekers of the challenges that asylum seekers face in gaining refugee status and the challenges in their everyday lives in the UK?

2. Do professionals who work with asylum seekers think there is an appropriate balance between the key debates of social justice and nationalist interests in the government's approach to dealing with asylum seekers?

3. What are the opinions of professionals who assist asylum seekers on ways to further support them, with a focus on social change?

This research initially sought to interview asylum seekers to gain first-hand experiences of the challenges they endure in their everyday lives, however, the context of this research had to be considered. There was a consensus with gatekeepers to the asylum seeker community that interviewing asylum seekers would create further stress under the pandemic conditions, contradicting the principle aim of ethical research being the avoidance of harm (Bryman, 2012). It was recognised that the inclusion of asylum seekers would be more beneficial over a longer period of time in order to establish better relationships to effectively overcome their potential vulnerabilities. Therefore, it was deemed more appropriate to interview professionals who support them. This community still offered highly valued first-hand experiences of working with asylum seekers, including expertise of the issues faced by this community as a result of the government's approach and lack of support. It further allowed the potential to contribute to social transformation by giving them an opportunity to voice their ideas for change that would be practical and achievable when considering the government's stance.

## 3.3 Theoretical framework

A qualitative approach seemed best suited to explore the perceptions of challenges faced by asylum seekers in their everyday lives. Flick (2018) understands a qualitative methodology as having the ability to describe and explain social phenomena 'from the inside', locating researchers in the natural setting in the worlds they are interested in, in order to understand the meanings people attribute to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Kuhn (1970) argues that the decision to use either a qualitative or quantitative framework is based on theoretical orientations, relating to how we conceptualize the world. As the research's aim was to explore the perceptions of everyday experiences, and was encapsulated by a focus for social change, it aligned with a constructivist paradigm, but featured aspects of a transformative approach (Mertens, 2010). Although a transformative paradigm orientates with the constructionist belief of a social construction of reality, it diverges in the sense that it does not believe in multiple realities, but in one in which there are multiple opinions (Mertens, 2010). Therefore, this research focused not only on the values and meanings of participants (Seale, 2012) but on the dimensions of culture, power, and privilege that shape realities (Merten, 2007).

In utilizing a qualitative approach, this research was based in an interpretivist epistemology. On the contrary to Mertens (2010), who explicitly denotes that a mixed-methods approach is favoured for transformative research, this research aligned solely with a qualitative approach in the form of semi-structured interviews. This choice reflects Hammersley's (2004) perspective that researchers should focus on a method that suits their research topic, rather than assuming a triangulation approach is superior. Therefore, choosing a qualitative approach was adequate, but only to the extent that the researcher acknowledged their values and biases, placed a specific emphasis on recognising cultural complexities in the data, and ensured that this research would ethically contribute to social change (Merten, 2007).

## 3.4 Data Collection

### 3.4.1 Sampling

The nature of this research required some level of nonprobability sampling, which allowed for judgment to influence the selection of individuals (Henry, 2013). Although this may be seen as a limitation, as it involves selection bias, Henry (2013) notes that this allows for

information-rich cases to be chosen and takes external restraints of time and access into consideration (Flick, 2018). A mixture of a convenience and snowball sampling strategy was used, with a target population of charity workers or volunteers over the age of 20, with a minimum of one year's experience working with asylum seekers. This was to ensure they would have an expert level of experience and be less susceptible to emotional trauma. These were appropriate sampling techniques as they are purposeful in nature, and a snowball strategy suited the difficulties of gaining access to this small population, by recruiting participants through a 'gatekeeper' (Clark and Bryman, 2019). Interviewing those who work with asylum seekers was chosen as they can relate to the shared sense of responsibility to alleviate social injustices in transformative research (Merten, 2007).

Purposive and small samples are often seen to restrict the external validity of findings, however, Crouch and McKenzie (2006) discuss how they provide more in-depth data suited to qualitative research. As qualitative research is more concerned with gaining insight into the lived experiences of individuals and generating alternative perspectives, rather than generalising a theory to a population, these sampling methods were appropriately used. However, it is important to note that access issues impacted the sample size and, therefore, when sampling ceased only six participants had been selected. As a result, it was difficult to gain theoretical saturation. Nevertheless, O'Reilly and Parker (2012) argue that saturation is not always the most important criterion for ending the sampling.

## 3.4.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

A semi-structured interview approach was beneficial to this research as it is a "uniquely sensitive and powerful method for capturing the experiences and lived meanings of the subjects' everyday world" (Kvale 2007, p. 12), which is required in a constructivist paradigm to allow for a depth of understanding. Moreover, the semi-structured interview consists of a sequence of themes and suggested questions: their unfixed nature permitted the flexibility to modify the interview guide in relation to new developments in the data collection (Maxwell, 2013).

In order to rule out any misinterpretation of meaning, respondent validation was sought, by asking for clarification of respondent's statements, and this also helped prevent researcher bias through an assumption of meaning (Maxwell, 2013). However, it must be considered that this feedback was no more valid than their responses, as Holstein and Gubrium (1995)

advise that the subject behind the respondent is not passive, but actively engaged in the means-making process. Responses are formed through the interactive process and interviews produce 'partial truths' (Clifford, 1986). Qualitative interviews, therefore, are criticised as lacking reliability and generalisability, and the data is often contextually specific.

The power dynamics between the researcher and the subject were recognised, as an interview is not a conversation between egalitarian partners. The decisions of the researcher influence the topics discussed, the questions posed, and which answers to follow up (Kvale, 2007). Power is an important consideration of a transformative paradigm, and this research minimized it effectively through developing rapport and forming a non-hierarchical relationship, which also helped transform participants being viewed as 'subjects', into valuable 'partners' (Jewiss, 2018). The interviews achieved this by asking open-ended questions and prioritised participant's accounts of the government's approach, how this shaped asylum seekers' challenges and subsequently the support their organisations offered. Participants were also given the space to propose ideas to ameliorate the everyday lives of asylum seekers, raise new questions, and mention anything they felt was relevant to the conversation. This way of interviewing recognised that participants often have more valid forms of knowledge than academics through their participatory processes with the vulnerable community in question (Phillips et al, 2013).

## 3.5 Data analysis
### 3.5.1 Transcription

Transcription is a central part of data analysis, and Hammersley (2010) proclaims that it is informed by decisions that are integral to the construction of findings, as it involves a level of selectivity and the use of cultural knowledge and skills to interpret the data. Although transcription is not a bias-free process, it is constrained by what is actually happening. It allows a level of detail unattainable in real-time communication and a continued analysis through referring back to previous transcripts during the analysis process.

However, transcripts are not unproblematic representations of data, as they cannot capture every level of detail and nuances in tone that can change the meanings of speech. Also, what is transcribed is often based on academic and personal interests, and transcripts exist on a continuum. Open transcribing decreases analytical prejudice, as it aims to capture every feature of the communication, whereas closed transcribing is based on predetermined

aims of the research (Jenks, 2011). Although open transcribing seems the favourable option, external constraints of time impacted on using this for this research, so 'professional vision' was used to determine how much detail to include (Goodwin, 1994). Fillers were only included in the transcript if they were deemed to have exhibited meaning.

### 3.5.2 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a flexible approach to data analysis, that allows for a detailed yet complex account of the data. This research utilised it in an inductive manner, as this allowed themes to be identified from the data, rather than based on the researcher's theoretical interests, and ensured that the ideological hegemony of existing literature did not limit the production of new ways of framing (Becker, 1986). A latent approach was used that went beyond the surface meaning of the data and considered the underlying assumptions that shaped meanings, with a particular focus on culture and power (Braun and Clarke, 2006). However, it must be noted that data is not analysed in an epistemological vacuum, and a passive account of themes emerging is naive. Therefore, the active role of the researcher in the construction of transcripts was minimised through the constant consideration of decisions made.

Data was analysed through coding, which fractured the data (Strauss, 1987) and arranged it into theoretical and substantive categories. The distinction between these is important, as the theoretical categories placed coded data into general frameworks, guided by prior theory, whereas substantive categories were developed for newly emerged concepts, that portrayed alternative ways of understanding the data (Maxwell, 2013). This was accompanied by memos that were compared, helping to develop themes and relationships in the data. Data analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection, and codes were evaluated on a continuous basis in light of new discoveries (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

### 3.6 Methodological limitations
### 3.6.1 Sampling

Access issues were experienced that lead to the widening of the scope of the sample, and it was adapted to include those who had worked with asylum seekers in the past five years. It was also recognised that the sample of support workers and volunteers could include previous asylum seekers, increasing the potential for unintended harm. Therefore,

consideration was given to the background of participants and it was made assured that all participants had lived in the UK for the past five years, in order to decrease potential trauma by recounting their experiences. Nevertheless, participants in this study did not fall under this category.

## 3.6.2 Interviews

Conducting semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility, however, Gubrium et al (2012) discuss how such methods cannot always account for the complexity of events which creates issues for memory and reporting. The academic background of some participants was also reflected in their response, and it was initially challenging to direct participants back to their own perceptions based on their experience, rather than on academic knowledge. This was solved through interview questions placing an emphasis on their experience in the field. Initially, questions revolving around the government's nationalist approach were phrased through 'national security' and 'criminal justice' terms, which resulted in confusion and an association with terrorism. Therefore, as the interviews progressed, these questions were rephrased into 'nationalist' terms, and therefore more relevant responses were given.

## 3.7 Ethical considerations

Ethical research dictates that participants should not be exposed to risks greater than those they encounter in their daily lives. As this research was deemed highly sensitive, greater emphasis was placed on assuring this research was ethically sound and conducted with total integrity (Macfarlane, 2009). Therefore, it abided by both the University of Sheffield's ethical code and the British Sociological Association (BSA) Statement of Ethical Practice (Bryman, 2012). An ethics application form that highlighted the ethical considerations was submitted and approved by the University, as this research abided by the relevant data protection laws and policies.

Right-based theoretical frameworks posit the avoidance of harm as its primary principle (Flick, 2018), and this was considered through the sampling strategy: it was ensured participants had over one year of experience working with asylum seekers and had been residing in the UK for more than five years, so they would be more comfortable discussing their experiences. A high standard of information was given about the research, through a

detailed information sheet, that enabled participants to make the decision to give informed consent (Walliman, 2016).

Identities were also anonymised using pseudonyms created prior to the transcription processes, and identifiable features, such as the organisation they worked with, were omitted from the transcript. However, Bryman (2012) observes it is not always possible to identify all circumstances where harm is likely, so working reflexively through the interviews was important to recognise and deal with any issues that arose. Data collected through interviews was stored on a password protected phone, and permanently deleted after the analysis stage was completed.

## Findings and Discussion

## 4.1 Introduction

The interviews revealed features of asylum seeker's lives were interlinked in complex ways, however, for the purpose of analysis, they have been separated into distinct categories. The first two relate to perceptions of asylum seekers' challenges and the final section advances ideas for social change. This reflects the transformative narrative of this research that recognises how marginalized communities, in this case, those who offer them support, value research that has the capacity to actively inform solutions deemed necessary and appropriate, rather than recommendations being produced externally to them and the data collection process (Flick, 2018).

## 4.2 Lack of Funding

### 4.2.1 Housing

Housing as a substantial challenge was explained by the government's lack of funding for asylum support, resulting in insufficient service provision. There was a consensus that the housing provided by the Home Office was inadequate and dangerous:

> *One of the scenarios we are fighting now is a family that was left without gas, without heating and without hot water for two days, with a two month old baby...Is it an extreme case? No, this can happen in other cases.* (Participant 5)

This ties into Phillips' (2006) account of asylum seeker accommodation being poor and well below acceptable standards, and supports that the government's housing support, NASS, gives little consideration to safety or support networks and focuses more on economic imperatives, further exhibited by the economically deprived areas asylum seekers were often dispersed to (Phillimore and Goodson, 2006). Moreover, the dispersal policy was criticized as being disruptive and impacting on asylum seeker's sense of belonging to a community.

As an example, participant 2 acknowledged how the government's lack of awareness of where asylum seekers were placed can lead to adverse consequences:

> *...far-right wing political groups that are very opposed to asylum seekers, recently like the English Defense League...they sort of invaded the hotels and sort of harassed and intimidated asylum seekers, that's even happened quite locally to where I am.* (Participant 2)

Participant 2's account offers support to Kirkwood et al's (2016) research, though differing in the sense that hostility was exhibited through hate crimes, committed by anti-asylum seeker groups, rather than as a response to asylum seekers representing a barrier to opportunities. In contrast to the literature, most participants claimed the surrounding communities were generally supportive of asylum seekers and offered positive accounts. However, this may reflect the participant's differing job roles, as only one was specifically involved in providing housing support.

### 4.2.2 Poverty and Destitution

Poverty was recognised as one of the most pronounced obstacles, as the majority of participants' organisations provided financial support in one way or another to asylum seekers. There was a marked distress over the level of asylum support given: around £37 per week being deemed overwhelmingly insufficient to provide basic minimum living standards:

> *It has a massive material impact for people who are claiming asylum...you can't afford food, if you have to choose between data for your phone and food for your family, it's going to impact every facet of your life.* (Participant 4)

Participant 2 described asylum seekers as living at a subsidence level and there was a common reliance on participant's organisations for toiletries and sanitary products, as state provided support did not stretch to cover these. This reinforces Mayblin et al's (2020) research on the slow violence of asylum policy, as the Home Office has interpreted the minimum living standard for asylum seekers as the minimum level of support needed for survival, regardless of whether this means living in poverty.

Living in poverty was also interpreted as creating symbolic challenges, relating to feelings of shame and humiliation. This was assumed to be exacerbated by the previous relative wealth they lived in, as participants explained how generally it is the most wealthy and resourceful individuals that have the ability to make the journey to seek asylum in the UK:

> *Often they come from quite wealthy families, so they are used to a much higher standard of living, and it's very humiliating for people to suddenly be right at the bottom of the heap.* (Participant 6)

These feelings of humiliation and shame extend beyond the structural inequalities and become inextricably linked to their sense of self. Bourdieu's (1999) concept of social suffering is applicable as it focuses on how feelings of pain can be internalised and built into subjectivity. Enforced poverty limits agency and the government becomes a dominant force, preventing asylum seekers from representing themselves in the social world. Participant 1 describes how this leads to them feeling worthless and that they do not deserve help, producing forms of double suffering (Frost and Hoggett, 2008). However, it was also observed this was not characteristic of asylum seekers specifically, but of all that live in poverty. It is the lack of rights combined with poor living conditions and opportunities that defines their experience.

### 4.2.3 Healthcare

The health of asylum seekers was interpreted in two ways: physical health and mental health, with mental health taking precedence in discussions. Mental health issues were seen to arise from a two-fold process: the trauma and stress of leaving their lives behind in order to escape persecution, and the mistaken expectation of entering a safe and welcoming country, only to be met with the UK asylum system that resulted in living in uncertainty; being treated with hostility and suspicion whilst receiving little support.

It was frequently stated that most asylum seekers had difficulties with anxiety and depression as a result of their traumatic experiences, coinciding with the literature that stresses their poor health in relation to other migrants (Schouler-Ocak, 2015). These were accentuated by their poor physical health, which was mainly posited as the result of living in impoverished conditions and worsening on arrival in the UK. Their declining mental and physical state supports Tomkow's (2020) qualitative study of the worsening health of asylum

seekers in the UK, with participant 6 specifically discussing how medications prescribed often had side effects and led to some asylum seekers developing diabetes and arthritis.

The quality of care provided by the NHS was also questioned, with participant 2 stressing that this was a positive component of the UK asylum system, whereas participant's 3 and 6 were critical of the NHS:

> *It is also the general architecture of the NHS, and the way in which it doesn't help as effectively people from different diverse communities.* (Participant 3)

> *When they go to the doctor they often come from cultures where mental illness is so taboo, there isn't even any language for it, so they explain their symptoms in physical symptoms.* (Participant 6)

They stressed the importance for healthcare services to take account of cultural discrepancies and expressed that barriers existed in the form of language, cultural expectations, and hostility, particularly in respect to not understanding English, despite services being reluctant to provide translators. This corresponds with themes in Briscoe and Lavender's (2009) study on maternity care for asylum seekers, as complications with language barriers existed and concepts were difficult to express in alternative languages. Interestingly, participant 5 expanded on previous literature by suggesting asylum seekers should be active in informing and educating current medical professionals on how they survived their own trauma. This would give them their own sense of agency through contributing and this knowledge would potentially aid others in similar situations.

### 4.2.4 Integration

Access to integration services, and funding for these services, emerged as pivotal barriers for asylum seekers, particularly because of the inconsistent definitions of integration between the government and support services:

> *I'm not a massive fan of the word...I think the way it's used often is kind of an expectation on people to integrate, as opposed to an expectation kind of like mutual learning and understanding.* (Participant 4)

Participants' definitions of integration predominantly revolved around understanding and adapting to each other's cultures without asylum seekers losing their cultural identity. In contrast, the government was depicted as actively trying to hamper integration in order to deliberately exclude asylum seekers, shown through the majority of government integration policies only being available to those granted refugee status. This substantiates academic literature on the contested nature of integration and upholds the argument that the government conceptualises integration in legal terms, as opposed to moral terms, thus limiting its policies to refugees (Phillips, 2006).

Barriers to learning English were the primary concern of participants, as they described how the government-funded ESOL classes were only accessible to those who had been in the UK for more than six months. Participants commented on the implications of barriers to learning English:

> *I know people, many of them have worked in different cultural contexts as accountants and scientists and research fellows and teachers, but when they come here, the whole wealth of knowledge and experience is there, but it's not transferable.* (Participant 5)

Obstructions to learning English were closely linked to asylum seekers' inability to work, as work gives asylum seekers the opportunity to learn English and retain a sense of identity:

> *...the whole system is totally disempowering, people lose their sense of who they are, I mean, our identities are so bound up with what we do...so if you're doing nothing, your self-worth drops, and it's very difficult to restore that for people.* (Participant 3)

The loss of the ability to transfer knowledge through language or skill was described by participants as having a catastrophic effect on asylum seeker's identity, where they struggle to find a sense of purpose in their lives. The potential for social exclusion due to the inability to work supports Bloch (2002) and Phillimore and Goodson's (2006) study's, and these identity losses can also be explained through Bourdieu's (2000) concept of social suffering. The inability to communicate and work equates to a loss of capacity and creates a dependency on others, which is lived out in asylum seekers' experiences being reliant on charities and the government for support. This is often in direct contrast with their home country experiences where they were self-sufficient and prosperous. It is argued that this

can lead to feelings of loneliness and a withdrawal from networks, although this is contradicted by participant 3's experience of asylum seekers taking on voluntary work in order to gain a sense of purpose and identity, resisting forms of suffering and displaying agency to integrate despite their position.

## 4.3 Stigmatisation

### 4.3.1 The Hostile Environment

The hostile environment was frequently referred to during the interviews, with the attitudes it created towards the asylum seeker population being one of its most detrimental consequences. The hostility built into the government's regime was regarded as a form of structural and systemic racism as it 'othered' asylum seekers, supporting Bosworth's (2008) claims that asylum policy excludes those who are seen as undeserving on the grounds of difference. These xenophobic attitudes were consequently used to distinguish who is worthy and who is not:

> *Unless you are from a particular wealth bracket or skills bracket, you're not welcome, so we're happy to accept the best and brightest, but we are not happy to accept anyone that does not correspond to that image of what a worthwhile migrant should be.* (Participant 3)

Participants expressed how those who did not comply with the government's perception of a deserving migrant, and whose claims had not been verified by the state, were often stigmatised through the categorisation as an 'illegal asylum seeker', despite this term being inaccurate as legislation dictates that seeking asylum is a legal status in itself. The government's emphasis of the 'bogus' status of asylum seeker's claims also supports much of the human rights literature on the government's failure to uphold international human rights. However, there were a variety of opinions relating to the extent of these abuses:

> *...you know we say that people with a well founded fear of persecution should be able to find refuge in the UK...there are no legal routes to enter the UK to claim asylum, and no investment in those legal routes either.* (Participant 3)

> *I don't have any faith that upholding human rights plays any part in their decision making when it comes to asylum policy at all.* (Participant 4)

> *...we do have an asylum system um...which does try to give people protection from human rights abuses, and I don't want to just completely undermine, you know, that whole of the government's effort to do that.* (Participant 1)

Despite this disparity, a common theme emerged that the hostile policies disregarded at least some aspects of international human rights and were inherently suspicious of the motivations of asylum seekers. Although participant 2 conveyed that influence was probably a lot more nuanced in government meetings and discussions, the enacted policies did not portray this, with being seen to look tough on immigration favoured over the needs of asylum seekers. This often proliferated into media discourse, theorised through the mediatisation of politics, as the media has become a favourable source of political communication and can create pressure for politicians to act within its political mood, resulting in simplistic narratives being forwarded that conflate economic migrants with asylum seekers and normalise extreme right-wing rhetoric to gain popularity (Krzyżanowski, 2018).

Participant 1 expressed how until granting asylum seekers refuge is in the interests of the state, the government would continue with their adversarial regime. This gives evidence to the literature on human rights frameworks, supporting Shafir and Brysk (2006) that the interpretation of rights depends on the ability to fit it into national frameworks, and questions Mayblin's (2016) argument that asylum seekers receive stratified rights based on international conventions. Participant 4 was particularly critical of the government and its lack of courageous leadership to intervene in the treatment of asylum seekers on the basis of human rights.

## 4.3.2 Criminalisation

A profound aspect of this hostile regime included an ongoing criminalisation of asylum seekers, which participants thought was partly in response to the terminology of 'illegal asylum seeker'; the government's preoccupation with fraudulent claims and their lack of sensitivity to genuine claimants. The detention of asylum seekers was described as one of the main factors for this ongoing criminalisation in the media and public:

> *They see news about criminal migrants, they see an asylum detention centre that looks like a prison, and they assume everyone in there has committed a crime in the UK.* (Participant 4)

Shockingly, participant 4 disclosed that even a senior individual in the criminal justice system was unaware that many detained asylum seekers had not committed criminal offenses. The ingrained association between criminality and asylum was regarded as emitting from media representations, as the mutually beneficial relationship between the government and media resulted in forwarding its negative and criminalising narrative. This coincides with the prevalence of labeling theory in the literature and the connection participants made between policy, media and public attitudes support studies of the demonization of asylum seekers (Khan 2012; Goodman and Speer 2007). Nevertheless, these representations were not seen as pervasive, with participant's observing that the liberal media was making attempts to tell alternative stories that generated sympathy, supporting Vestergaard's (2020) work on the framing of asylum seekers varying in relation to a left-right political spectrum.

### 4.3.3 A Culture of Disbelief

All participants explicitly mentioned that the asylum system was permeated by a culture of disbelief, with asylum seekers having a responsibility to prove their situations. This was epitomized by the experiences of asylum seekers that participants had previously worked with:

> *...how do you prove that you were gay in Uganda and that you were fearful of your safety, when you are not in Uganda anymore and the Ugandan government doesn't play ball in terms of sharing information, and how do you make a case?* (Participant 3)

> *...their claim was rejected in the first place, because the wife said the wrong name of the river of her country.* (Participant 5)

Asylum seekers inability to give admissible proof for the persecution they experienced in their home country was seen to drive inherent suspicion: a key challenge given most participants had supported asylum seekers with appealing their initially rejected claims. Participant 1 discussed how women especially were at a disadvantage as the cultural

differences in their home country often meant they were not aware of certain landmarks asked of them by the Home Office to give credibility to their claims, which is substantiated by participant 5's quote. This was seen to exacerbate the belief that they are dishonest about their motives, and as a result they are subjected to intensive questioning, suspicion and risk being detained. This is assumed in Hassan's (2000) account of detention, as asylum seeker's safety is often compromised by bearing the burden of responsibility to prove their legitimacy, despite many being genuine cases.

### 4.3.4 Belonging to a Community

As discussed previously, belonging to a community was assessed as the key feature of integration. In contrast to a plethora of negative experiences explored previously for asylum seekers, participants felt they did have positive experiences forming social relationships in and outside their community. However, the contested nature of integration existed in the charity sector too, conveyed through participant's conflicting understandings of and expectations for integration:

> *It's a matter of attitude as well, whether they really want to integrate, or whether they just want to mix with, um, their own community, and sort of exist in a sort of ghetto with people from their own background.* (Participant 2)

> *There are plenty of British people I know that are integrated that don't speak to anyone outside their own street, or outside their own class and ethnicity, I don't think we should expect things of people overseas that we don't expect of ourselves.* (Participant 3)

Despite this, participant's expressed how they believed asylum seekers felt a sense of belonging through the support and efforts of charitable organisations and forming friendships within their local communities, exemplified by the generous donations of goods and supplies and through accessing informal integration services. This seems to contradict much of the literature that claims they often feel unwelcome and face racism and hostility from the communities they live in (Kirkwood et al 2016; Phillimore et al 2007). Participants were aware of the possibility for this though, and explained that particular groups could feel less included in the community, such as those from a Muslim background:

> *I don't know a single woman who wears a hijab who hasn't been insulted in the street by a stranger.* (Participant 6)

This supports the use of an intersectional lens that uncovers how multiple challenges can interact based on interrelated factors, such as gender, ethnicity, and religion in this instance (Crenshaw, 1991). There was also a recognition by participant 4 that racism and other hostile behaviours in the community may be prevalent, but their position as a charity worker situates them around like-minded people who are very supportive towards asylum seekers. An indication of this racism was only shown when they boosted their posts on Facebook and received an abundance of hate in response.

## 4.4 A Call for Change

### 4.4.1 Local Government

Participant's organisations collaborated closely with local governments, who were described as being very supportive, albeit constrained by national immigration policies. Spencer's (2018) work on local governance having a level of responsibility for immigration controls highlights the ability for local authorities to be inclusive towards asylum seekers without overstepping their boundaries. Participants suggested that the goal should be to persuade them to be as radical as possible, within the existing asylum system, by allowing asylum seekers access to public services where they do not need to discriminate, such as libraries and leisure centers, and that services should be reactive to socio-economic needs. This relates to Parekh's (2000) call to increase service accessibility, and that public services should acknowledge cultural differences and be sensitive in service delivery. Participants also felt that local governments should be put under pressure to speed processes up, as they revealed they had worked with asylum claimants waiting on a final decision for more than ten years. This echoes Walsh's (2020) research into the backlog of asylum seeker cases, therefore ways to alleviate their conditions during this time are of the utmost importance.

### 4.4.2 Framing

Framing refers to the way people make sense of objects and events in the social world, through constructing frames that are culturally determined definitions of reality (Goffman, 1974). Participants discussed how the current forwarded frames of asylum seekers are

particularly negative, revolving around the overuse of the NHS, being deceitful in their motives, and being a burden on society. Participants proposed new ways of framing asylum seekers to encourage positive public perceptions, through framing them as brave and resilient people taking a stand against persecution in their country, with a yearning to contribute and build a new life in the UK.

In addition, participant 5 warned against victimising asylum seekers as despite this stemming from humanitarian organisations with good intentions, it ironically 'others' them and strips them of their agency:

> *I think we need to learn to understand rather than coming with a white saviour hat...I think that way we are creating a culture of dependency, even sometimes it's a humiliation to them.* (Participant 5)

This provides support for Wroe (2018) and Crawley et al (2016), as the idea that asylum seekers are victims and dependent on others undermines their status as survivors, who have demonstrated extraordinary strength escaping persecution and journeying successfully to the UK in adverse conditions. Participant 5 suggested that rather than having prejudices or preconceived assumptions, we should give asylum seekers a platform for open conversations and mutual understandings. Although frames are often proliferated by the media, participants regarded change as being achievable through altering public perceptions, and education was posited as an effective strategy.

## 4.4.3 Education

Education was seen to be too broad of an approach, hence participants categorised this in respective areas. The most popular area to reach was the public, as public attitudes are heavily influential in policy and practice:

> *I'm sure if public attitudes changed that policy hopefully would too...the government often aren't the first to the plate for things like that, but they don't like to be left behind either.* (Participant 1)

There was a common consensus that the government often responded to demand from the public, as their policies can be decisive in gaining votes. Schools were seen as the

foundation of greater public education, acting as a process of secondary socialisation by constructing norms, values, and acquisition of knowledge. Recommendations to introduce education in schools on the traumatic experiences of asylum seekers and their potential to contribute, rather than disregarding this matter or sustaining the negative rhetoric, supports Kirkwood et al's (2016) view that education can transform perceptions of asylum seekers. This would give the potential to ingrain these positive conceptualisations in the public from a young age, in a hope to influence future approaches towards asylum seekers.

Education was further divided into logistical training of frontline staff, to ensure their full understanding of asylum seekers' challenges. This was seen as paramount as these individuals are partly responsible for the information conveyed to asylum seekers themselves: if the frontline worker's education was not adequate, how could they be expected to support and educate asylum seekers in the most beneficial way? Understanding asylum seekers' experiences in their home country was deemed necessary to support them successfully, as asylum seekers are often unaware of their rights due to their often authoritarian and oppressive backgrounds. Moreover, cultural differences can create difficulties to comprehend even simple processes in the UK. Nonetheless, participant 5 was realistic in his statements that this takes time and mistakes would be made, but nevertheless, he felt it was our responsibility to guide them through this journey and attempt to make this transition as smooth as possible. Without a desire to educate ourselves, as well as asylum seekers:

> *the division is going to be bigger and bigger, until it becomes 'us' and 'them', rather than building a bridge it will be building a wall.* (Participant 5)

### 4.4.4 Inclusion and Visibility

Allowing asylum seekers themselves to spread the stories of their lived experiences was seen to create an awareness within the public of the reality of their lives, and there was hope that this inclusion and visibility would transform perspectives:

> *I do believe the more people are able to tell their stories directly, the less cartoonish the depiction of people will be, and the more nuanced the approach, and the understanding of the wider public will be.* (Participant 3)

This corresponds to participatory processes, where asylum seekers are included in a range of social institutions thus solving the problem of asylum seekers living in a 'blindspot'. Getting to know them as equals would be an eye-opening experience for many:

*...the greater visibility, the breakdown of stereotypes begins to occur.* (Participant 3).

Participant 3, though, acknowledged the fear that accompanies this, as speaking out against their discrimination could be part of the reason they sought refuge in the first place. However, safeguards such as the media being compliant in protecting their identities could be a strategy to overcome this. Participant 5 further forwarded the idea of mutual learning, and that the inclusion of asylum seekers would help those in the UK to understand more about themselves, their own culture, and their own role in perpetuating a system that discriminates. Recent participatory research from Morville and Jessen-Winge (2019) involved asylum seekers in the whole process of research, portraying how inclusionary strategies actually have the potential to facilitate asylum seeker's wellbeing and enhance their occupational status, particularly in respect to their inability to work. This gives a marginalised community a sense of purpose and belonging, enhancing their overall experiences in the UK.

## Conclusion

### 5.1 Research Aims

This dissertation aimed to explore professionals' perceptions of the challenges for asylum seekers in their everyday lives. The balance between key governmental approaches was also considered as contributing to these challenges, and the research revealed a distinct imbalance between social justice and nationalist approaches, with the latter being favoured. In addition, realistic routes to social change were considered with the intention of ameliorating the lived experiences of asylum seekers.

The scope of this research topic was extensive in relation to the small-scale nature of this study, and although academic literature and data collected on this topic indicate that these challenges have a wider resonance within the asylum seeker community, this study does not seek to generalise these findings. It acknowledges that asylum seekers' experiences are diverse and individualised, and the perceptions of professionals provide an insight into their

experiences within their local asylum seeker community, rather than applying these findings to situations outside of the research's context. Despite the inability to generalise this data to the whole asylum seeker population, participants provided an insight into their own interpretations of the challenges asylum seekers face and offered their understanding of how the government's lack of support and adversarial approach manifests itself in the lived experiences of asylum seekers.

## 5.2 Summary of Findings

The findings demonstrated that challenges can be organized into two interrelated categories of practical and symbolic, producing severe levels of disadvantage and discrimination. Participant's organisations were often created in response to the lack of funding and support provided by the government for asylum seekers, and they offered financial and practical aid through housing support, material goods, and community and education services. The lack of state investment produced severe disadvantages for asylum seekers through high levels of poverty and social exclusion, which characterised their lives. Lack of resources resulted in damaging consequences in the form of declining physical health, and emotional trauma where feelings of shame and worthlessness were internalised and further degraded asylum seekers' wellbeing.

The consequences of the asylum system were also explored in relation to the stigmatization of asylum seekers that produced severe levels of discrimination, and this research revealed how rhetoric surrounding asylum seekers was overwhelmingly negative within the government, and often proliferated into the media. The asylum system was regarded as infringing on the human rights of asylum seekers, by processes of othering and criminalisation through governmental policy and media representations. However, in stark contrast to the literature, the surrounding communities were comprehended as generally supportive, and forming social relationships in and outside their communities was a positive experience for asylum seekers.

## 5.3 Recommendations for Future Research

This research builds on the wealth of existing literature associated with the challenges asylum seekers endure, however it expands on established ideas by introducing potential solutions to asylum seeker's plight. This contributes to the emerging field of research that

aims to alleviate social injustices by conducting research with the aim of empowering marginalised communities. Although this study was limited through time constraints and access issues to the marginalised community in question, the prospective changes still have the ability to improve the lived experiences of asylum seekers. In order to expand on this, it would be beneficial to conduct future participatory research, where asylum seekers and professionals are given the opportunity to cooperate and engage with the whole research process equally. This would increase the validity of research by gaining first-hand accounts of the challenges asylum seekers face and the solutions they deem appropriate. Moreover, it would give increased opportunities for asylum seekers and professionals to develop a mutual understanding of each other's lives, to learn from each other, and ensure support is directed towards the specific needs of asylum seekers, whilst simultaneously giving them dignity, value and self-worth.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1 - Ethics Application

Aims and Objectives:

- To explore the perceptions of professionals working alongside asylum seekers on the challenges that asylum seekers face in gaining refugee status and the challenges in their everyday lives in the UK.
- Critically review the key debates of social justice and criminal justice and to examine if there is an appropriate balance between them in the government's approach to dealing with asylum seekers with respective emphasis on social rights versus legal regulation.
- To explore the perspectives of professionals assisting asylum seekers in relation to ways to further support them, with a focus on transformative change.

Methodology

This research will be conducted from an interpretivist standpoint, and therefore will use a qualitative approach, studying the perceptions of staff members and volunteers who work alongside asylum seekers on the challenges that this community face. I intend to conduct six semi-structured interviews with six members of refugee and asylum seekers charities or organisations. I will ideally use the video communication network Google Meets, as video calls give me the opportunity to build up higher levels of rapport than compared with just audio. I will transcribe these interviews using pseudonyms to protect the identities of my participants and I will analyse my findings thematically, using codes and memo-writing. I will work inductively by conducting a few interviews, generating codes and developing theoretical sensitivity. More interviews will be conducted and analysed, generating more codes which can be refined and categories produced through constant comparison.

Personal Safety

As this research involves a highly sensitive topic, it runs risks of exposure to traumatic experiences. Without appropriate protective measures and self care, it may lead to emotional and psychological distress and vicarious trauma, a negative change in my thoughts, perceptions and interpretations. This research may be emotionally demanding as it involves investigating perceptions of the challenges that face a very vulnerable community, so it is necessarily that I attenuate the risk of experiencing vicarious trauma. In order to do this I will conduct the research remotely, which will provide a physical boundary setting so that I do not come into direct contact with traumatic and sensitive research materials. This will also provide both the participants and I protection from exposure to any illnesses, most specifically COVID-19. I will build appropriate breaks into the research schedule if needed, which will limit sustained exposure to any upsetting discussions. Lastly, throughout this

research, I will integrate stress management processes, such as keeping a positive outlook, accepting that there are things out of my control, and maintaining a balanced and healthy lifestyle in order to mitigate any feelings of trauma that could arise.

How I will identify potential participants

I will identify potential participants through asylum seeker charities and organisations. I am looking for charity members over the age of 20, with 1+ years of experience working with asylum seekers, and I will aim to interview three male and three female volunteers or staff, as they may have different perceptions of the challenges that face refugees as they may have worked with asylum seekers of different genders and from different backgrounds. I will identify them using a mixture of convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Members of asylum and refugee charities are potentially a difficult group to access due to their resources being stretched coping with the pandemic and helping aid asylum seekers in this challenging time. Therefore, I will identify the first few participants through opportunity, then use snowball sampling as an easier way to gain access to the rest.

How I will access them

I will access my participants through being a member STAR, student action for refugees, as through this organisation I have access to the other charities that work directly with asylum seekers. I will gain access through ASSIST, an asylum seeker charity based in Sheffield, who directly support destitute asylum seekers that offer support through accommodation, advice and access to essential services. I will email this organisation and provide them with information about my research project, summarising my key aims and objectives. The charity will include this information in a newsletter which will be sent to their staff and volunteers, inviting them to partake in this research. I will ask for the contact details, namely email addresses, of those willing to participate so that I can contact them directly to send the full information sheet and consent form; this will mean I can avoid including my email address on the newsletter, so only those interested in participating will have access to my email.

Consent

I will provide an information sheet, which will explain the research process to the participant in order to give them as much information as I can, before they agree to participate. This will include information concerning their confidentiality and anonymity as participants, as well as what the research entails and why it is being conducted. I will then gain consent through an

informed consent form, where participants give their permission to partake in this research, and for the interviews to be analysed and used in the findings of this research.

Participant safety

What is the potential for physical and/or psychological harm?

This research is highly sensitive, as it involves investigating the experiences of a vulnerable group, so there is a potential for participants to experience psychological and emotional distress. However, due to the participants being experienced professionals who work with asylum seekers in their day to day lives, there is only a mild risk of psychological harm as they will have a support base through the charity and will likely have personal support strategies in place.

How must this be managed?

Participants in sociological research should not be exposed to additional risks or risks greater than those they encounter in their daily life. Therefore, any potential risks to participant's safety and well-being will be set out and discussed openly as part of the informed consent process. I will prepare to respond appropriately to any potential issues participants may have with the research, and I will inform participants of how they can contact my supervisor, Harriet Churchill, if they have any questions or concerns I cannot answer.

Participation will be entirely voluntary and all interviewees will be promised confidentiality. I will inform participants that they do not have to answer any questions they do not want to, and they have the right to withdraw from the research at any time. I will anonymise their identities using pseudonyms which will be created prior to the transcription process following the research. Any identifying features indicated in the interview will be omitted from the transcript in order to ensure their anonymity. I will also anonymise the organisation, and not reveal the city in which this organisation is based. It is unlikely that I will detect any psychological issues of participants due to this research as they are professionals who work in this field daily, nevertheless, if I do detect anything, it is my responsibility to inform the participant if I feel it will affect their future well-being. A de-briefing will follow the interview, which will allow participants to ask any further questions or talk about aspects they feel are relevant to the research which have not been touched on in the interview.

My research will not include an extreme sample, as I am interviewing professionals that work with asylum seekers, rather than asylum seekers themselves. I will seek out individuals with 1+ years experience in this field, so they will be knowledgeable and more comfortable talking about their experiences of working with asylum seekers. It is possible that volunteers or staff members might have previously been asylum seekers or might be refugees, so may have personal experiences of the challenges they faced. Therefore, I will only interview those which have been settled in the UK for 5+ years, to minimise any risk.

Although I will take copious measures to ensure the safety and wellbeing of participants, it should be noted that it is not possible to identify every issue that may arise during the course of this research. However, if any unexpected incidents arise I will take initiative and attempt to manage the situation in line with the University's Ethical procedures and make my supervisor aware of the situation.

Data confidentiality

All data collected will be strictly confidential. I will achieve this through anonymising participants in both the transcription of the interview and in the analysis and findings section of my research. Pseudonyms will be used to replace the real names of the interviewees, and any distinguishing information that could reveal the identity of the participants, or any individuals they may be referring to, will be removed from the data.

Who will have access to the data and in what form?

Only I will have access to the audio recordings, however my supervisor will have access to the transcription of the audio recordings and any further data included in the research. I will use pseudonyms in the transcription of the data to ensure that I am the only person who has access to personal, identifiable information, such as their real names or where they work. My supervisor will have access to the pseudonymised version of the audio recording transcription. I will only share identifiable information with other parties if I recognise that the participant is experiencing serious psychological or physical harm, as it is then my duty to inform others to protect the participants well-being.

How will my data be stored securely?

I will store all data on the University Google Drive, or on a password protected mobile device or laptop. I will transfer all data from my mobile device to the University's Google Drive at the

first given moment, and subsequently will delete this data from my personal device. At no point will any data be accessible to outside parties, other than my supervisor.

## Appendix 2 - Interview Guide

So this research is investigating the perceptions of challenges that asylum seekers face, more especially in their everyday life, and how the government's imbalance in social justice and nationalist approaches manifests itself in their experience. It will also be exploring the potential changes that would improve the lives of asylum seekers.

Can you tell me about your role and how you got involved in this area?
- personal relationships?
- work?
- volunteers?

What aid does your organisation provide? Does it address any specific issues?

In what ways (if any) do you work with and cooperate with public services and the local government? Are they constrained by the government's policies?

- What does the integration of asylum seekers mean to you? - Does it relate to gaining refugee status, not being destitute, being settled in a community, being able to speak English, having friendships inside and outside their community?

To what extent do you think asylum seekers have become integrated into UK society?

In what ways do you think asylum seekers are (or are not) integrated into UK society? What could be done to increase the integration of asylum seekers? (Education, changing public perception, increase in financial support).

In what ways do you think asylum seekers struggle economically? (Practically, symbolically - stigma with being poor)

What do you think would help reduce their difficulties?

In what ways do asylum seekers struggle with their health? Physical/mental health, healthcare services, what sorts of provisions are needed to improve their overall health?

Have you had any experiences with asylum seekers that have been subjected to racism and hostility?
- In what areas have you seen this treatment?
- How do you think this manifests - verbal abuse, discrimination in support etc.

What do you think is the purpose of detaining asylum seekers?
- What are the consequences of detention?
- To what extent do you think asylum seekers are treated like criminals?
- Does the blurring of economic migrants and asylum seekers contribute to this?

Do you think there is a gendered experience for asylum seekers?
- Does gender impact on the challenges they face in the UK?
- what types of gendered support is there?
- What types of gendered support do you think is further needed? (women in healthcare, in interviews, recognition of cultural differences for men and women)

What role do you think the media has in the representation of asylum seekers?
What do you think is the dominant image of asylum seekers in the media?
What could be done to change the media's outlook on asylum seekers? (is it linked to the government, the public or both - is the stance of the media dependent on the government's position?)

Can you tell me, to what extent, do you think the UK is committed to international human rights?
- Do you think asylum seekers are given these rights?
- Why do you think they are/are not?

What do you think the UK's duties and responsibilities are for the care of asylum seekers? -Equality for humans
- Providing a place of safety

What do you think the UK's reasons are for their current asylum
system? - Blurring of economic migrants and asylum seekers?
Do you think they have alternative interests?

What do you think needs to be changed in the treatment of asylum seekers and why?
Where do you think this change has to come from - the public or the government, or
both?

In what ways do you think asylum seekers could be further supported in their everyday
lives, through support services, public or local policy changes?

# Appendix 3 - Example of Data Analysis

Part One - Lack of Funding/Financial Support

Participant 1

| Lack of government funding | Impact |
|---|---|
| Poor housing/accomodation | Insecurity of living in poor housing |
| Being poor/living in poverty | Symbolic challenges with being poor |
| Lack of opportunities to learn English/ESOL classes | Hampering integration |

Participant 2

| Lack of government funding | Impact |
|---|---|
| Lack of integration policies | Social exclusion |
| Poor 'barrack' accommodation | |
| Dispersal policy | Creates insecurity |
| Poverty | Living at subsidence level, cannot meet basic survival needs |
| Health | Mental health (anxiety and stress), physical health - previous torture or sexual abuse |
| Barriers to English/ESOL classes | Impacting integration with community |
| Sympathy from community | Generous donations and support |

Participant 3

| Lack of government funding | Impact |
|---|---|
| Poor housing | Dangerous to live in, impact on physical health |
| Poverty | 60 per cent less than benefits, feeling less human |
| Inability to access paid work | Loss of identity |
| Healthcare | Health worsens on arrival to the UK, NHS not culturally adaptive - language barriers, cultural expectations etc. |
| Inability to 'do' anything | Social exclusion, lack of identity and purpose, volunteering to gain purpose |
| Limited access to learning English | Social exclusion |

Participant 4

| Lack of Funding | Impact |
|---|---|
| Unsafe and inadequate housing | Charities have to give advice and support for housing |
| Poverty | Enforced destitution, material impact |
| Healthcare | Mental health issues untreated |
| Barriers to learning English - ESOL classes available only after six months | |
| Government actively hindering integration | Expectation for asylum seekers to adapt to UK, rather than mutual learning/understanding |
| Community support | Positive relationships with local charity members |

Participant 5

| Lack of Funding | Impact |
|---|---|

| NASS | Disruptive, impractical accommodation provided (e.g hotel room) |
|------|------|
| Poverty | Inability to travel to services, 'bottom of the heap' |
| Healthcare | Cultural discrepancies in definitions (mental health), lack of support for severe traumas |
| Language | Lack of translators and translations of websites/documents, inability to share knowledge - identity consequences |
| Lack of opportunities/missed opportunities | Unaware of support, misinformed - lack of spreading awareness of support |
| Inability to work | Identity losses, inability to learn English |

Participant 6

| **Lack of Funding** | **Impact** |
|------|------|
| Services not culturally adaptive | Confusion and misinterpretations based on cultural differences |
| Language barriers | Difficult to integrate, lack of communication, charities responses involve intensive English courses |
| Poverty | Humiliating as often from prosperous backgrounds |
| Inability to work | Disempowering, identities bound to what we do, lack of self worth |
| Health | Mental health issues due to time taken to receive a decision - constant insecurity, cultural differences - mental health as taboo, medications for illness give physical side effects |

Key Challenges

- Housing/Accomodation
- Poverty - Practical and Symbolic
- Health - Physical and Mental
- Lack of work - Identity losses, barrier to integration, lack of self worth

- Barriers to learning English - identity losses, barrier to integration, social exclusion
- Integration - inability to meet others, access issues to services

Links to Theory
- Social exclusion
- Alienation
- Loss of identity - social suffering, double suffering, stigmatisation
- Slow violence of asylum policy
- Othering