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**The Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview:  
proposal for a new methodology to explore the asylum  
seekers' experiences through images**

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*Il visibile pensa, è pensiero:  
il sogno pensa, pensa per immagini,  
immagini che contengono più memoria e più futuro  
di quanto possa avere conoscenza l'Io della veglia.*

Domenico Chianese & Andreina Fontana, Immaginando

## Introduction

*“Vorrei capire.”*

*“Cosa?”*

*“Tutto, tutto questo.” Accennai intorno.*

*“Capirai quando avrai dimenticato quello che capivi prima.”<sup>1</sup>*

ITALO CALVINO, L'origine degli uccelli

The epigraph that opens the present work perfectly reflects the feelings experienced by me and, of course, by anyone who approaches the forced migratory phenomenon: the desire to understand and catch something that seems unintelligible, the constant sensation of being “on the high seas”, the need to leave our own certainties and frameworks of thinking in order to open the mind to the exploration of the “unknown”. These feelings, experienced from the beginning until the end of the present research, have determined continuous steps forward and back but they have also acted as stimuli in the attempt to understand always something more. Actually, the idea that based the whole study was properly based on the assumption that the classic systems of knowledge and interpretation as well as the classic methodological systems seem inadequate to a deep understanding of such a complex phenomenon as well as of its consequences on the emotional and psychological level.

In the last few years, the forced migratory phenomenon has more and more increased reaching a greater attention in the international and scientific communities and debates becoming one of the biggest challenge for western societies at different levels.

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<sup>1</sup> author's translation:

*“I would like to understand.”*

*“What?”*

*“All, all this.” I hinted at around.*

*“You will understand when you will forget what you understood before.”*

The forced migratory phenomenon is, in fact, a “multilevel” phenomenon whose approach, that needs to be complex, has to take simultaneously into consideration its juridical basis, its impact on the psychological and social dimensions and the cultural aspects involved.

The present work approaches to the forced migratory experience through a psychological perspective but it tents, simultaneously, not to forget all these stratifications.

As such, the first chapter of the present work offers an overview of the laws that support the requests for international protection and the human rights protection as well as of the increasing numbers that characterise the so-called present day “refugee crisis” with a specific focus on the Italian sociopolitical situation that represents the context where the whole research-project was conducted. The second part of the first chapter, taking the psychodynamic perspective as theoretical background, examines in-depth the psychological dimension of the forced migratory phenomenon. The first chapter, therefore, analyses the most valuable contributes of the psychodynamic perspective to the study of migrations which ranges from the individual impact of the experiences of “uproot” and “take root”, coming across the individual and social impact of the so-called men-made disasters, arriving to the ethnopsyoanalytical and transcultural contributes that shed light on the important implications generated by the encounter between different social and cultural backgrounds. All these aspects, which the psychodynamic perspective has argued speaking generally about migration, extensively converge into the theory of Renos Papadopoulos, a British psychoanalyst, who elaborated a theoretical model for the study of the forced migratory experience. Finally, the first chapter also offers a panoramic of the most recent psychological researches among asylum seekers and refugees.

The second chapter is focused on the principal object of the present work: the relationship between trauma and narrative. First, it will explain the way in which the present work looks at the narrative, as a meaning-making process through which individuals give sense and meaning to life events. Then, it will explore the relationship between trauma and narrative, showing the so-called “trauma enigma” (Mucci, 2014). The traumatic experiences, in fact, disrupt the processes of symbolisation which has in the production of a narrative, its higher step; but, at the same time, the possibility to put in words and to develop a narrative of the



traumatic experiences, trying to give them coherence and sense, represents the first step for the trauma recovery. The second part of the chapter will take a step back in the attempt to explain the symbolisation process and its development, highlighting the role played by the iconic register of thinking for the psyche in its being the first step of the symbolisation process. This paragraph will be particularly important in the attempt to understand the central core of the research-project carried out. Finally, the chapter finishes showing the specific functions and problematics aspects of the narrative device for asylum seekers.

The third chapter presents the first exploratory study conducted. The study had the aim to evaluate traumatic and resilient levels of 20 asylum seekers hosted into two male Extraordinary Reception Centres and to explore in-depth meanings and representations of their migratory experiences. The exploratory study had also the aim to identify the principal questions and problematic aspects of doing research with asylum seekers in the attempt to develop the main issues following the research project. The study shed light on different important dimensions concerning the asylum seekers' experiences as well as the methodological approach used. With this regard, it showed the appropriateness of the qualitative research in exploring the asylum seekers experience allowing to adopt a person-centered approach but, at the same time, showed also the limits of the application of a "pure" narrative instrument, as the in-depth interview, for the exploration of their experiences.

The fourth chapter explains the second study carried out and aimed at the development of a new instrument to explore the forced migratory experience. This instrument, called the Asylum Seekers' Images-Mediated Narrative Interview, was developed gaining from the psychodynamic perspective the value and the function that the images have in representing the first step of the symbolisation processes. The chapter shows, therefore, the different steps through which the new instrument was developed. These steps have involved two groups of 20 male asylum seekers hosted in two Extraordinary Reception Centres. First, each group attended a focus group (Morgan, 1996, 1993; Kitzinger, 1995; Shamdasani, Stewart, & Rook, 1990) with the task to express the first image/event/thing that came to their mind thinking about their pre-migratory, migratory and post-migratory experiences. Participants' images were collected, classified into categories of meanings and analysed through an analysis of frequencies (Smith, 2000; Rositi, 1988; Krippendorff, 1983). Second, a

photographer who works in the migration field was contacted with the aim to choose, from his dossiers, some photographs able to give representations to the data emerged by focus groups. Third, a second focus group was conducted in the attempt to verify with participants the validity of photographs in representing the data produced by themselves and in reflecting their pre-migratory, migratory and post-migratory experiences. Fourth, a specific account and administering procedures of the instrument were developed.

The fifth chapter shows the third study of the research-project aimed at evaluating the effects of the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview on narratives and on meaning-making processes. This study was conducted on 36 male asylum seekers hosted in three different Extraordinary Reception Centres and randomly divided into two groups. Traumatic, post-migratory difficulties and resilient levels were assessed in order to evaluate risk and protective factors and used as descriptive variables for both groups. Moreover, the images-mediated narrative interview was administered to the experimental group; a non-images mediated interview was administered to the control group. Descriptive and statistics analysis were performed on risk and protective factors. Both the interviews were analysed through a quali-quantitative analysis taking into consideration the central cores and variables of the narrative meaning-making process: internal states, coherence and reflective insight (Fivush et al., 2012). At the end of the chapter, a proposal for a Grid to code the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview is also proposed.

In conclusion, the sixth and final chapter describes a gender-focused study conducted in the attempt to explore meanings and representation of a small group of Nigerian female asylum seekers. The group of participants was a small but very homogeneous group of 5 Nigerian asylum seekers women. In line with the homogeneous characteristics of participants, their experiences were explored through a semi-structured interview developed and analysed on the basis of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) principles (Smith, 1995). The results obtained and their implications for research and for clinical practise were discussed with a specific focus on gender dimensions.

## **Chapter 1**

### **BORDERS AND TRANSITS: CROSS THE MULTILEVEL**

#### *Overview*

In the last few years, the increasing number of displaced people worldwide has reached an increased attention becoming one of the biggest challenge for the western societies at different levels: political, social, cultural as well as psychological.

In order to show the complexity and the different dimensions which involve the forced migratory phenomenon, this chapter will initially present a panoramic of the laws which support the human rights protection and an overview of data of the present-day “refugee crisis”, with a specific focus on the Italian situation, gradually arriving to focus the attention on the psychological dimensions of migration. As such, the second part of the first chapter, on the one hand will include a focus on the psychodynamic perspective, that is the theoretical background which guides the present research-project, on the other hand, it will propose an overview of psychological researches conducted among asylum seekers and refugees in the international as well as in the Italian context.

### 1.1. The asylum granting: displacement and human rights protection

The term “refugee”, from French “*réfugié*” (escaped), or “exile”, from Latin “*ex-solum*” (out-land), firstly indicate a social-juridical status defined by the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951). Grounding its roots in the Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which recognises the right of persons to seek asylum from persecution in other countries. The United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, better known as the Geneva Convention, was adopted in 1951 and represents, nowadays, the centrepiece of international refugee protection.

The Geneva Convention entered into force on 22 April 1954, and it has been subject to only one amendment in the form of a 1967 Protocol, which removed the geographic and temporal limits of the 1951 Convention that, as a post-Second World War instrument, was originally limited to persons fleeing events occurring before 1 January 1951 and within Europe. The 1967 New York Protocol, removing these limitations, gave the Convention universal coverage.

Ratified by 145 Member States, the Geneva Convention, in contrast to earlier international refugee instruments, had the merit to endorse a single definition of the term “refugee” in Article 1. According to the Convention, a refugee is a person who, “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality (or former habitual residence) and is unable to return for fear of persecution.” (Geneva Convention, 1951).

Moreover, the Convention is underpinned by a number of fundamental principles, most notably non-discrimination, non-penalization and non-refoulement. Convention provisions, for example, are to be applied without discrimination as to race, religion or country of origin and, thanks to the developments reached in international human rights law, without discrimination as to sex, age, disability, sexuality, or other prohibited grounds of discrimination. Moreover, the Convention stipulates that refugees should not be penalized for their illegal entry or stay in a country, recognising that the seeking of asylum can require refugees to breach immigration rules. The Convention further contains various safeguards against the expulsion of refugees. The principle of non-refoulement provides that no one can

expel or return a refugee, against his or her will, to a territory where he or she fears threats to life or freedom. Finally, the Convention also suggests some basic minimum standards for the treatment of refugees; such rights include access to the courts, to primary education, to work, and the provision for documentation, including a refugee travel document in passport form, the “Nansen passport”, an identity document for refugees devised by the first Commissioner for Refugees, Fridtjof Nansen, in 1922.

Since 1951, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has represented the “guardian” of the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol, offering and providing international protection and material assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers. According to the legislation, States are expected to cooperate with it ensuring that the rights of refugees are respected and protected.

Before achieving international protection status, a refugee is usually defined as an asylum-seeker: someone who has entered a host country to seek protection and whose request for international protection has still to be processed. It is estimated that every year, around one million people seek asylum worldwide (UNHCR, 2016).

As social-juridical status, the refugee status is reached through an evaluation aimed to verify the presence of the criteria established by the Geneva Convention for the recognise of a refugee adopted by all Member States.

Across the Member States, a sort of autonomous jurisdiction regarding the asylum system was adopted by European Union Member States. In the next section will be offered a brief overview of the EU legislative framework in order to clarify the social and jurisdictional context of the present research-project.

### *1.1.1 The European Union laws on asylum seeking*

After the adoption of the Schengen Agreement about the elimination of internal border controls of signatory states, since 1999 the European Union has set up the so called CEAS, Common European Asylum System, in order to unify the minimum standards related to asylum, leaving to the EU Member States the discretion to establish procedures for obtaining and withdrawing international protection.

At the present-day, after different directives updated across time, new EU rules have been agreed, defining high standard and cooperation to ensure asylum seekers are treated equally:

- The Revised Asylum Procedures Directive aims at quicker and better quality asylum decisions;

- The Revised Reception Conditions Directive ensures human reception conditions for asylum seekers across EU;

- The Revised Qualification Directive clarifies the grounds for granting asylum and makes asylum decisions more robust;

- The Revised Dublin Regulation aims at regulating the process of establishing the State responsible for examining the asylum application;

- The Revised EURODAC Regulation provides law enforcement access to the EU databases of the finger prints of asylum seekers under strictly limited circumstances in the attempt to prevent or investigate the most serious crimes, as murder or terrorism.

According to the principles of the Geneva Convention (1951), European Union established common directives for Member States in order to define a “refugee” as well as to establish the right to have or not documents. However, there are still no common criteria which define the hospitality policies to act towards asylum-seekers and refugees. Consequently, hospitality policies of EU Member States, even if necessarily based on the EU prescribed criteria, finished to be very different from country to country.

Many of the present-day tensions in the EU over migrations stem from the Dublin laws.

The Revised Dublin Regulation determinates the EU Member States responsible for examining an asylum application within the European Union. It aims to rapidly identify the Member State responsible for an asylum claim providing also the transfer of an asylum seeker to that Member State. Generally, the responsibility belongs to the State first entered by asylum seekers. Moreover, the Dublin Regulation was born with the aim to prevent the possibility to apply for asylum in multiple Member States and to reduce the number of “circling” asylum seekers.

Despite its intentions, nowadays the Dublin Regulation has attracted different criticisms.

According to the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) and UNHCR, the regulation often fails in providing fair and effective protection. The UNHCR has also claimed the uneven distribution of asylum claims among Member States.

One of the main object of debate, in fact, concerns the parameter of the first entered State in assuming the examination of the asylum application because it exposes, de facto, some Member States to host higher numbers of people than others. Considering the European refugee' crisis started in 2015, for example, the EU member states positioned on the Mediterranean Sea were more exposed than others to host huge numbers of asylum seekers.

Once showed the juridical framework representing the legislative background of the present work, in the next section data and numbers of the present-day “refugee crisis” will be showed with a specific focus on the Italian situation and on its hospitality policies in order to show the specific context where the present research project was conducted.

#### *1.1.2 The present-day “refugee crisis”: data and hospitality policies, a focus on Italy*

According to the United High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), over the past two decades, the global population of forcibly displaced people has grown substantially reaching the highest records ever registered (UNHCR, 2017).

By the end of 2016, 65.6 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide as result of persecutions, conflicts, violence or human rights violations; of them, the global refugee population stood at 22.5 million (UNHCR, 2017). The ongoing conflict in Syria was one of the biggest reason of fleeing, however, crises in sub-Saharan Africa also caused significant refugee movement (UNHCR, 2016). As reported by UNHCR (2017), by the end of 2016, Turkey was the major refugee-hosting country, followed by Pakistan and Lebanon and, in Europe, by Germany.

Europe represented one of the favourite destinations with a number of arrivals of 200.000 people per year (UNHCR, 2016). The last statistics have revealed that Germany, Italy and France are the main European countries for asylum requests (Eurostat, 2017).

In Italy, the highest record of arrivals was reached in 2016 when around 170.000 people arrived through the main migratory route across the Central Mediterranean Sea from Libya (Fondazione Ismu, 2016).

According to the Ministry of Interior, by the end of 2017, a total of 130.119 individuals requested for international protection: 109.066 men, 21.053 women, 9.782 non-accompanied minors, 6.527 accompanied minors (Ministry of Interior, 2017). Nationalities of migrants entering Italy varied significantly over time, depending on the areas of conflict, political instability, human trafficking and changing migratory routes. Nowadays, they principally come from the sub-Saharan African (Nigeria, Gambia, Senegal, Ivory Coast), Bangladesh and Pakistan (Ministry of Interior, 2017).

Regarding the asylum requests results, during 2017, out of total of 81.527 of people examined, only the 8% obtained the refugee status, whereas the 8% achieved the subsidiary protection, the 25% obtained the humanitarian protection and 60% of requests were denied (Ministry of Interior, 2017).

At the present day, the forced migration seems to be the most “suitable” way to enter Italy due to the advantages granted by entering in the primary reception system and this aspect has generated a vivid debate regarding the nature of migrants arrived in Italy. According to one school of thought, not all migrants who arrive in Italy flee from war, persecution or human rights violations but, simply, they would like to find better life conditions running away from a disadvantaged context. On the other hand, a humanitarian perspective claims that, although not all migrants flee from persecutions or wars, all of them come across Libya where all of them, due to discrimination and racism, were illegally imprisoned, tortured, raped and subjected to high human rights violations for months or over.

Currently, the Italian reception system for asylum seekers is highly fragmented. In Italy exist, in fact, different types of reception centres: the CPSAs (first-aid and reception centres); the CARAs (reception centres for asylum seekers directly managed by the Ministry of Interior); the CDAs (short term reception centres directly managed by the Ministry of Interior); the CAS centres, temporary/extraordinary reception centres (primary reception centres managed by private cooperatives); the SPRAR network (protection system for both asylum seekers and refugees which offers primary as well as secondary reception).

Nowadays, around 140.000 asylum seekers are hosted in the extraordinary reception centres-CAS, only around 14.000 are hosted in the primary governmental reception centres-



CDAs and CARAs, 23.061 both asylum seekers and refugees are hosted in the SPRAR network.

In terms of efficiency, the SPRAR network, based on a network among different organisations guided by a municipality and aimed to promote self-employed paths (i.e. offering work training course and promoting integration policies), represents the most efficient type of reception existing in Italy.

Despite this excellence, currently the leadership of the primary reception is managed by the CAS centres which, born as temporary solution to deal with the so-called North-Africa Emergency in 2015. They represent the fundamental pillar on which the Italian primary reception is built. Starting from the North-Africa Emergency, in fact, the Italian government decided to outsource the service delivery to private organizations (Ministry of Interior, 2015). This has created a wide-spread business offering services to asylum-seekers with limited control from the Italian authorities. Because the private organisations which manage the primary reception might have or might not have experience in the immigrations field, nowadays, the main concern about the CAS centres regards how much they tend to business or, on the contrary, how much they are interested in promoting a human rights protection offering a “good hospitality”.

Nevertheless, the current reception system for asylum seekers, although organised to offer house, food, Italian lessons, legal and psycho-social support, also shows a number of inadequacies, including the dispersion and overcrowding of the existing reception centres, their uneven distribution over the national territory, and the uncertainty concerning the length of stay. Due to the increasing numbers of migrants arrived in Italy, in fact, the time of stay has lengthened so that, currently, asylum seekers spent one year and half or two years on average before receiving the evaluation. In Italy, the role to evaluate the asylum granting is up to the Territorial Committees, composed by 3 members of the government and one delegate of the UNHCR. In Italy, the asylum status, recognised on the basis of the criteria of the Geneva Convention, grants a five-year residency permit which allows to work, to subscribe him/herself to the National Health System, to benefit from the educational system, to have the Nansen passport, to obtain the family’ reconnection, to ask and obtain the citizenship in the host country after five years. In addition to the asylum status for refugees

under the meaning of the Geneva Convention, there are other categories of documents contemplated by the Directive and pointed towards individuals that are considered “refugees” in broader sense. The refugee in this broader sense includes not only those who have a well founded fear of persecution, but also those who have a substantial risk to be tortured or to be subjected to a serious harm if they return to their country of origin, for reasons that range from war, violence, conflict to massive violations of human rights. Those individuals can be eligible for “subsidiary protection” which grants a three-years residency permit that can be renewed if the conditions which have been allowed it persist. Furthermore, some Italy adopts another residual form of protection, the so-called “humanitarian protection”, available for those who are not eligible for the refugee status or for the subsidiary protection, but cannot be removed from national territory because “serious reasons of a humanitarian nature” exist (such as age or health, or in the case of victims of political instability, episode of violence, insufficient respect for human rights, or natural environmental disasters). The protection is valid for two years and can be converted into a residence permit to work.

As mentioned above, the increasing number of displaced people worldwide represents one of the biggest challenge for western societies on different levels: social, political, cultural as well as psychological. In order to “cross the multilevel”, in the previous paragraph it was shown sociopolitical and juridical levels implicated into the displacement phenomenon, whereas in the following ones will be shown the cultural and psychological dimensions which always are involved in the migration phenomenon.

## 1.2. The psychodynamic approach to the study of forced migrations

The psychodynamic perspective represents the perspective which guides the present research-project. This perspective, since the pioneristic work of Grinberg & Grinberg (1990), has interrogated itself on the experience of “take root” or “uproot” in a new setting which makes migration flows not only a phenomenon of social resonance but also a strong emotional experience.

Generally, from a psychodynamic perspective, the migratory experience is itself an ambiguous phenomenon (Raison, 1980) which evokes a repeated scenario of losses and

transformations. The lack of the daily routine, the fracture of the links with the Motherland, the need of a continuously work of identity reconstruction can be perceived as a “daily micro-traumatism” (Risso & Böker, 2000) which can configure migrants as particularly vulnerable populations.

Specifically, refugees and asylum seekers, as expression of a specific category of migration, the forced one, are defined by their socio-legal status, but from a psychological viewpoint, refugee status goes well beyond the social-legal and is a question of identity status, which involves complex dynamics of individual and social redefinition (Margherita & Tessitore, *under review*). In other terms, we could look at the refugee procedure to achieve the international protection also as a path aimed to reconquer an identity lost due to the experience of removal and, in many cases, denied due to the experience of dehumanisation connected to the extreme events lived. In such terms, during this path, asylum seekers live a phase of both social-juridical and identity suspension (Margherita & Tessitore, *under review*).

The most valuable contribution of the psychodynamic approach to the study of migrations regards three fields: the identity, the culture and the reflection about trauma. As highlighted by the psychodynamic approach, in fact, migrations always impose a continuous work of identity redefinition: the leaving of the country of origins and the experience of being suspended between two worlds put, in fact, in crisis the identity feeling of a migrant (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1990). Moreover, the psychoanalytic approach also highlighted the importance of the cultural aspects showing how the identity feeling is constantly defined and contained by the culture, meant as the envelope of the psychic construction. Due to the continuous and difficult challenges which are imposed to migrants, migration can be configured as a potential traumatic experience (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1990). Nowadays, looking at the asylum seekers and refugees’ experience, this potentiality is fully confirmed by the *real* traumatic experiences usually lived by them. That is the reason why, the psychoanalytic contribution on the relational and social aspect of trauma, in this context, could be particularly useful.

Even though these aspects are considered closely interconnected each other, they and the psychodynamic approach about them will be showed separately, gradually arriving to

expose a psychoanalytic model focused specifically on forced migration, the one of Renos Papadopoulos, which could offer a complex and integrated viewpoint about the refugees' experience.

### *1.2.1 The identity fracture and the potential "traumatic" character of migrations*

The psychodynamic framework highlighted "identity redefinition" as one of the central issues of migration. As such, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the main problem of the migrant is being suspended between two worlds, so he/she lives a double absence: that of his original country and that of the new hosting country. Migrating constitutes, therefore, a potentially traumatising experience which can be configured as a crisis (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1990) paradoxically representing, at the same time, the emblem of transformation' experience.

Grinberg & Grinberg (1990), in their pioneristic work on exile, highlighted that emigrating is a paradoxical experience because it contains at the same time the loss of the identity reference points and the potentiality of a "new born".

Tausk (1945) highlighted that as the child finds out objects and his Ego, as the adult in his fight for auto-conservation, constantly repeats the experience to *find* himself and to *feel* himself. Grinberg & Grinberg (1990) have highlighted that the feeling of identity is the result of a continuous process of relationships of spatial, temporal and social/group integrations' bonds. The bond of spatial integration allows the relationship between the different parts of the Self and maintains the cohesion between them, making possible the comparison with objects and facilitating the Self-non Self differentiation, so the feeling of individuation. The temporal integration bond connects the different representations of the Self through the time, establishing continuity and building the feeling of being ourselves. The social integration bond implies relationships between the Self and the objects, through projective and introjective identification mechanisms, and makes possible the feeling of belonging. Migration, according to Grinberg & Grinberg (1990), hits all these bonds but, depending on the situations, one of them could be more damaged than others. Migrating implies loosing the network of meanings, relationships and customs which, normally, ensures and preserves

the sense of our own identity and organises the Ego borders which, during migration, become more fragile and opened to indefinite zones of empty and confusion.

For those reasons, migration always implies an identity redefinition and, before completing it, it could be read as an experience that puts in serious danger the identity feeling of the migrant. The lost of significant objectives exhibits to the risk of loosing parts of the Self and, this process could lead to an effectively dissolution of the Ego.

In such terms, the migratory phenomenon is not an isolated traumatic experience but a process made by a series of partial traumatic events which involve a *feeling of protective lack* (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1990). This feeling, based on the born trauma model (Rank, 1972) and on the experience of “loosing the protective mother”, would be the same to the experience of the lack of “container” which, in extreme situation, lead to the disintegration and dissolution of the Ego borders. This risk seems bigger if during the childhood deprivations and difficult experiences of separation had been lived with consequent related anxious feelings. To understand the value of the migratory phenomenon, it is important to consider what the migrant leaves and what he meets in the hosting country. A migration, in fact, starts well before the departure; it starts in the country of origin and within the nuclear family. The project to leave is always accompanied by sadness and feelings of guilty which are strongly interlaced with euphoria and trust feelings. If the ritual of the departure can be shared in the group of origins, a shared history/narration could be created, and the reference points which normally nourish the continuity of identity can be maintained. The migrant needs, therefore, a *potential space* (Winnicott, 1974), which represents a time/space of transits between the Motherland and the external world. If this space cannot be created, the departure produces a wound, a temporal caesura between the Self and the surrounding environment. Leaving will imply, therefore, confronts oneself with fears and ancestral pains: the nature of this pain provokes a return to regressive mechanism and an ongoing mourning (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1990). Moreover, considering the importance of the members’ reactions of the hosting country, Grinberg & Grinberg (1990) interpreted the migration experience in terms of content-container relationship (Bion, 1962). The dynamic interaction between the migrant (content) and the hosting country (container) would configure a *catastrophic change* (Bion, 1981) which transforms the identity structure coming across

moments of pains, disorganisations and frustrations. If the migrant is able to overcome those moments, he may catch the positive side of his experience. The interaction migrant-hosting country (content-container) has a potentially disruptive force that can put in crisis also the structure of the hosting group. The migrant, with all his/her background and experiences, represents, in fact, the “new idea” to which the hosting group answer with different tendencies: from the optimistic acceptance to the drastic refuse.

In conclusion, Grinberg & Grinberg (1990) summarised the migratory process in different stages:

- 1) In the first stage the migrant feels pain and loss accompanied by fear for the unknown and feelings of deep lack, abandonment and loneliness. Paranoid, confused and depressive anxieties can lead to regressive moments and disorganisation of thought. This first step can be followed by a maniacal state in which the migrant, defensively, identifies himself with the hosting culture, removing his customs. Mechanisms of scission, in which the reality is strictly divided into “good” or “bad”, can be experimented.
- 2) In the second stage, nostalgia and suffering for those the migrant left behind emerged: the recognition of the refused feelings leads to the recognition of his own psychic pain. At the same time, the adaptation to the new culture gradually increases making the interaction between internal and external world more flexible.
- 3) In the third stage, in positive conditions, we can assist to a recover of the capability to project the future; the past is no more a lost paradise but a space where it can be possible to come back. In this stage it can be possible to elaborate the grief for the lost of the origins and this elaboration promotes the integrations between the own culture and the hosting one, supporting a strengthening of the Ego and the identity.

Grinberg & Grinberg’ (1990) theorisation was the first that highlighted the identity redefinition as one of the biggest challenge for migrants and the identity fracture as one of the most common consequence of the migration process. Underlining and explaining “the identity issue” becomes particularly important for the present work, above all considering its participants. For asylum seekers, in fact, the “identity issue” assumes a fundamental importance: by definition they could be defined as “suspended people” and the process to

acquire a new identity and, maybe, to repossess their past identity depends on a huge number of variables which involve individuals as well as contextual dimensions.

### *1.2.2 The role of the culture: ethno-psychoanalytic and transcultural insights*

The term “ethno-psychiatry” was introduced in 1961 by Georges Devereux and defined as a therapeutic technique able to give the same importance to the cultural dimension of the disease as well as to the analysis of internal mental operations (Devereux, 1970). Through the bridge concept of culture, the ethno-psychiatry made possible the complementarity of subjects as the ethnology and the psychoanalysis, normally far each other for objectives and methods. One of the central aspect of Devereux’ theory (1970) was the assumption that the human being psyche and the culture are strictly interlaced, not only on a methodological level but also on a functional one.

From the ethno-psychiatry and from a branch of the cultural anthropology was born the ethno-psychoanalysis, which had its biggest exponent in Nathan (1996). While the ethno-psychiatry focused on pathologies stemmed by different ethnic contexts, the ethno-psychoanalysis had the specific purpose to investigate the relationships which derivate from the encounter with the Other, always different by the Self. However, although psychoanalysis may be used to understand inner conflicts, only the anthropologic point of view can understand the cultural contexts. In Nathan’s work, this point of view regarded a knowledge about specific cultures which he conceptualised as “traditional” cultures.

*“The encounter with the Other is always traumatic”* (Nathan, 1990, pp. 66) and, in a multi-ethnic society, becomes more and more important to understand who is and how the Other, who constantly imposes a change of our devices of tolerance and comprehension, is made (Nathan, 1993).

Coppo (2003), an Italian exponent of the ethno-psychoanalysis, claimed that migrations always impose the encounter with the Other and a re-think of our models of health, aetiology and treatment of the disease. So, both culture and belonging represent not only the definition but also the containment of the construction and development of our own identity, which depends on the acquisition and transmission of group, familiar, social, organisational and institutional models. The cultural base becomes, therefore, part of our body and of our Self,

strongly embodied in ourselves, and generates shared and simultaneous relational models. As highlighted by De Micco (1993, 2011), people recognise themselves as subjects culturally-determined when they arrive in different cultural contexts, therefore, when the function of mirroring and resonance typical of our own group of belonging, the *feeling of being ourselves*, is missed. So, migration is the space where the cultural and social dynamics are embodied with psychic and relational ones. In fact, the migration issue always refers to the cultural constitution of the individual psyche: the human being is destined to the sociality by his biology, because he needs of another body for born and of another psyche for giving meanings to his primary experiences. Moreover, the human being usually needs of a cultural structure, through which finding the instruments of emotional and symbolic representations useful to construct his interiority. Psychic and cultural structures are one the double of the other (Nathan, 1990): so always migrants experiment a suffering due to the lost of double cultural and this loss makes fragile not only their identity structure but also the border between internal and external world.

As disciple of George Devereux, Nathan built up a specific consultation for clients with a migrant background introducing the interpreters and cultural brokers into therapy in the attempt to make the therapeutic space open to the cultural representations of ‘non-Western’ origin. One of the major innovations of this approach was the invention of the “ethno-psychiatric group setting”, where several therapists from different cultural backgrounds work together with one client or family. Grounded its root in the Devereux’ notion of “complementarism”, Nathan proposed that therapists or clinicians worked on a double level separating strictly the client’s discourse about cultural contexts from the inner dynamics or the subjective contents. According to Nathan (1990), a therapist who listens to a client’s narrative should first try to understand the specific cultural and socio-historical context to which the client is referring. Once he/she understood this context, he or she may analyse the inner world of the client.

Another concept of great importance for the French ethno-psychoanalytical approach is that of cultural countertransference. Nathan (1990) and later Moro (1994) used this concept to talk about the emotional reactions therapists may have with regard to the real or perceived Otherness of a client from a different culture. Learning about cultural diversity, working in



different cultural contexts and in a multicultural team, should help therapists take some distance with regard to their own cultural position, process which Moro (1994) calls “décentrage” (decentering). This technique opens up the possibility of an *intermediate space* (Winnicott, 1974), a space where culture and cultural representations are not only talked about, but also created through the encounter with the Otherness.

So, during the last years, many developments have occurred within French ethno-psychoanalytic approach (Moro, 2011, 1998; Sturm, Heidenreich & Moro, 2008; Moro, de la Noë, & Mouchenik, 2006; Baubet & Moro, 2003) that have introduced a dynamic concept of culture.

Culture, in fact, is not thought as a fixed frame but as a process created in human interactions (Moro, 1998). Moro, keeping some of the basic idea introduced by Nathan, highlighted the importance of the so-called processes of hybridisation (*métissage*), and the importance of reorienting the ethno-psychoanalytical approach, which she named “transcultural”, in the direction of playful and creative work with cultural representations. Moro (2011) introduces, therefore, a dynamic concept of culture in which transcultural therapies become aimed to provoke creative dialogues about different ways of perceiving the world.

Independently from the adoption or not of a transcultural approach, it is important to highlight that the considerations made in this field are particularly important in highlighting the need to reassess the role played by the culture. This need, as suggested by Bäärnhielm et al. (2010), is particularly urgent for clinical practices in order to strengthen training of mental health practitioners in concepts of culture and strategies for intercultural care able to recognize the value of clinicians’ own linguistic and cultural knowledge as added skills.

### *1.2.3 Psychoanalytic developments about trauma: from the intra-psycho to the interpersonal and social level*

The present section will offer an overview of the psychoanalytic developments about trauma which moved from an attention to the intra-psycho aspect of trauma to a renovate attention to its interpersonal and social nature.

The psychoanalysis, since its origins (Freud, 1893-1895; 1895; 1925), showed a vivid interest for the so-called *traumatic category*.

Actually, the born of the whole psychoanalytic theory coincides with the Freud' reflection about the possible meanings of neurotics' symptoms; in such reflection, the trauma represented the fundamental element. According to a classical psychoanalytic theory, the trauma could be meant as a "*break of the protective barrier*" (Freud, 1920, pp. 215), as an intolerable, unexpected and unpleasant event which burst into the mind of the subject and, due to its intensity, overcomes the capacity of the Ego to elaborate it. As highlighted by Freud (1895), trauma seems to have a particular dynamic of action, that he defined "*nachtraglichkeit*" ("deferred action" in English or "*après coup*" in French), which always involve two times: at first, the subject experiences an unpleasant event whose record is removed; when, in a second time, this record can be processed, it assumes a traumatic valence. So the trauma, in Freudian and post-Freudian theories, is an isolated or repeated event which produces a quantity of psychic excitement able to rip a previous elaborative order and to impose a new elaboration work which can or cannot lead to a pathological defensive structure. The Freudian reflection about trauma was not linear through the years: firstly, he identified in a *real* sexual seduction behaviour, perpetrated by an adult, the traumatic cause of the consecutive neurotics' manifestations; then, the pathological and real role made by the adults was replaced by the infant phantasies, oedipal and incestuous, named original phantoms (seduction, castration, primary scene). This change of course represented an important moment of the Freudian theorisation because it made possible the transfer from the conceptualisation of trauma as consequence of a *real*, external event, to its *phantasmatic*, *intra-psychic* aspect.

Since the Freudian theorisation, the psychoanalysis has always focused its attention on the study of the trauma and on the role that the talking cure has on traumatised people; however, as brilliantly highlighted by Semi (1988), after the Freud' theorisation, the psychoanalytic interest always more moved towards a "widen" definition of trauma more similar to the "cumulative trauma" described by Khan (1963) than the "little blister" described by Freud (1920), giving testimony a new attention to the *relational* nature of trauma.

The “cumulative trauma”, according to Khan (1963), is the consequence of a process in which the baby experiences a repeated lack of the maternal function of containment. Furthermore, the hypothesis that the precursors of the thought and affectivity, made by unconscious processes, can be disturbed during the early childhood was supported by the discovery of the implicit memory, thus, of the existence of events in the very early childhood which cannot be recalled as well as registered. Nowadays, the attention is focused on the traumatic condition as a premature disease of the mother-child attachment relationship, we can just think to the so-called “early relational trauma” (Shore, 2001) or the “traumatic attachments” (Albasi, 2006).

Beside the attention toward the *relational* nature of trauma, starting from the work on the veterans and/or on the survivors of the Second World War, and then, of the Vietnam War, the clinical interest began to move towards a new attention for the *real* aspects of trauma which was, previously, at the centre of controversy between Freud and Ferenczi. Therefore, to the trauma, in a strict sense, the psychoanalytical reflection moved always more towards the so-called *traumatic situation* which always implies a vital situation that involves the relational world (Baranger, Baranger & Mom, 1988).

Surely the discriminant factor which make traumatic an event is the subjective sensation of victims to feel themselves more or less threatened or powerless. As claimed by Laplanche & Pontalis (1967), in fact, we cannot talk of traumatic events in an absolute way, without considering the personal sensitivity of each different subject.

So, even if the reality of the exceptional event is at the heart of the PTSD diagnostic category, the meaning that victims give to the events is fundamental as the event itself. Neurosciences developments have demonstrated that these meanings are made by the representations elaborated by the limbic system and the orbitofrontal cortex. The subjective interpretations given to the meaning of trauma continuously evolve even after the traumatic event is finished (Kilpatrick et al., 1995). Furthermore, the so-called “kindling”<sup>2</sup> (Van der

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<sup>2</sup> Intermittent stimulation of the limbic system with an electrical current, initially too small to produce behavioural effects, can eventually sensitise the limbic neuronal circuits and lower neuronal firing thresholds (Van der Kolk, 1987).

Kolk, 1987) continuously re-active the traumatic circuit making the trauma potentially always “present”. Additionally, the “recall” of the trauma seems to be always mediated by the attachment system (Fertuck et al., 2009; Gabbard, 2005; Liotti, 2005).

As precisely highlighted by Mucci (2014), many factors define the meaning given to the trauma and, therefore, the traumatisation level, influencing the very thin border between interpersonal and intra-psychic level:

- the presence or absence of an attachment figure;
- the quality of the attachment relationship (i.e. an unsecure attachment predisposes to vulnerabilities);
- the social or cultural meaning given to the event and the sharing of that cultural values;
- the presence or absence of social support;
- the duration, repetitiveness and the seriousness of the exposition to the event and the age.

The renovate psychoanalytic attention for the *real* aspect of trauma, imposed also a re-consideration of the context where people experience traumatic events opening to a differentiation between the so-called *human-made disaster* and the *natural* ones. Considering that the meaning which everybody of us attribute to the traumatic event is one of the most important element in influencing the seriousness of the consequences of trauma, it seems clear why people who are subjected to a natural disaster more easily will accept it as part of their destiny (De Boer et al., 1999; Lifton & Olson, 1974). The extreme experiences lived by survivors, veterans and, forced migrants today, are always experienced in the situations of the so-called *men-made disasters*<sup>3</sup> (Mucci, 2014), such as war or political tortures. Forced migrants’ experiences are, in this sense, very similar to the severe traumatisation lived by the survivors of the Second World War but, in another sense they are also different from them because of the different culture which usually give meaning to

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<sup>3</sup> In line with Mucci (2014), the use of the term “men”, compared to the neutral “human” to indicate the generally called human-made disaster, is a specific choice made by virtue that genocides, wars, rapes and tortures are really made by human beings of masculine sex.

the traumatic event itself, differentiating the way in which individuals, families and communities make sense of violence and adversity (Kirmayer et al., 2010).

The consequences of extreme traumatising are very complex and involve the body, the mind and the social adaptation (Varvin, 2014). Torture, for example, that is the most common human rights violation that forced migrants arrived in Italy experienced, constitutes a profound violation of personal integrity and dignity because it undermines the moral basis of human relatedness and community (Kirmayer et al., 2010). Perpetrators aim to create a situation of powerlessness and uncertainty in their victims; however, the effects of torture will include also fragmentation of family and community networks through the spread of fear and mistrust, and the erosion of social and political solidarity (Campbell, 2007; Kira et al., 2006; Kagee & Naidoo, 2004; Silove, 1999; Jaranson & Popkin, 1998). The massive trauma, in fact, hits not only the Ego and the relationship with the internal objects, but also the assumption that the world is a secure and structured place (Varvin, 1999). The extreme atrocities made by human beings have, in fact, the explicit aim to destroy the subject as part of a social community and to destroy the community itself, hitting the social links. Moreover, even if the survivor does not speak about his/her experience, other people know about it and the social security is strongly damaged by this knowledge.

The massive trauma aims to disrupt the emphatic dyad; as highlighted by Laub & Lee (2003), this situation can be connected to the “dead mother complex” described by Green (1980) which is the real expression, according to the author, of the Freud death instinct and it is connected to the block of the processes of thoughts and symbolisation.

So the survivors live, in more or less intensive way, an extreme alienation from themselves, the so-called experience of *de-humanisation*, from their history and from the “other”, in which is enclosed the experience of being outside from the whole human and social community (Rosenbaum & Varvin, 2007). In this sense, restoring relationships and a sense of community represent the central issues in the work with the victims of severe trauma (Van der Kolk, 2015).

#### *1.2.4 Towards a complex model of the forced migration experience: the Renos Papadopoulos' model*

Renos Papadopoulos, Jungian psychoanalyst, is the director of the Centre for Trauma, Asylum and Refugees at the University of Essex in Colchester (England).

His theorisation starts with the consideration that the phenomenon of refuge intersects a wide variety of dimensions but firstly, it is configured as a socio-political and legal phenomenon, with strong psychological implications. Therefore, any psychological or therapeutic approach to refugees, adopting a systemic perspective, should take into consideration all the interrelated dimensions (Papadopoulos & Hildebrand, 1997).

According to Papadopoulos (2007), becoming refugees is the result of being forced, directly or indirectly, to abandon the home as a result of some political and/or military actions. This means that people become refugees as consequence of different social-political circumstances, attempting to begin a new life using legal means in order to be allowed to settle in another location. In the difficult process that ranges from dislocation to relocation, the needs of refugees are multi-faceted and multi-dimensional (Papadopoulos, 2001). These needs, usually, cover the entire spectrum of human needs—from the basics ones of human survival (safety, food, shelter) to the more abstract ones (need of love, belonging, self-esteem). Having survived adversity and extreme events, refugees tend to be resilient and resourceful, but if this capacity is negatively affected, they may need more help in different areas of their functioning. Papadopoulos (2007) stated that this ability to be or not negatively affected by adversities is strongly related to the so-called “psychological immune system”: *“the more this ‘system’ is damaged, the more help the affected refugees are likely to require in ever more areas of their lives”* (Papadopoulos, 2007, pp. 302).

Understanding that the phenomenon of becoming a refugee is not of a psychological nature needs to be emphasized because, nowadays, the mental health professionals tend to approach the state of refugee as if it was a psychopathological state, focusing mainly on the concept of trauma. Generally, in fact, there are two possible ways to approach the refugees' issue: the first is considering the psychological impact of experiences during the whole process of dislocation and relocation, accepting and recognising that each situation and each temporal dimension of the migratory experience can have different psychological impacts

on the person; the second is related to the investigation of psychopathological consequences on the “psychological immune system”, mainly approached by the usual theories of psychological trauma (i.e., the use of the PTSD category) based on the assumption that certain external events, on their own, are traumatic to all people. However, “*in both situations there could be a danger of considering refugees as a homogeneous group of people, as if they belonged to a clearly defined psychological or psychiatric diagnostic category*” (Papadopoulos, 2007, pp. 303).

Regarding the specific nature of circumstances which can damage the psychological immune system, psychologists tend to use the category of trauma. In recent years, due to the increasing number of displaced people worldwide, more and more the discourse about the “refugee trauma” was developed (Alcock, 2003; Boehnlein & Kinzie, 1995). It, somehow implies, *per se*, that all those who experience the refugee adversity will become psychologically traumatized. Papadopoulos (2002) argued that the discourse about the “refugee trauma” tends to be limiting because is focused only on a little segment of the entire spectre of refugees’ experiences which, otherwise, could be divided in different phases:

- the *anticipation* phase starts when people perceive a danger and decide the best option to avoid it;

- the *devastating events*’ phase is the phase of the concrete violence: when the enemy attacks and destroys and the refugees escape;

- the *survival* phase is the phase of the safety but refugees still live suspended between two worlds;

- the *adaptation* phase starts when refugees try to adapt themselves to a new life in the hosting country (Papadopoulos, 2000a, 2000b).

The discourse about the “refugee trauma”, with the focus on the diagnostic category of PTSD, is mainly focused on the devastating events phase, ignoring the potentially devastating consequences of the other phases that could have, or not, a traumatising quality themselves (Papadopoulos, 2002).

Avoiding denying the utility of the PTSD category which has the merit to describe and individuate a clear syndrome and the severe reactions to extreme events, Papadopoulos (2002) proposed, instead, according to Joseph et al. (1997), a complex lecture of trauma

where the PTSD symptoms range on a *continuum* from the normal adaptation to the frankly pathological conditions. Nowadays, the PTSD category, according to Papadopoulos (2002), concentrating on the external reality, misses to account for the intra-psychic factor as well as the social construction of trauma which, constantly, permeates functions and structures of the mental health services that, sometimes, perpetrate the pathological version of the “refugee trauma”.

In Greek, the term trauma means “injury” or “wound” and, in psychology and psychiatry, it refers to a psychological injury. Papadopoulos (2000; 2001; 2002a; 2002b) conducted some etymological researches and claimed that the root of the verb *teiro* (which means “to rub”) has two main connotations: to “rub in” and to “rub off” something. So, the rubbing can be of two kinds: “*rubbing in-an injury or a wound-and “rubbing off/away”-a clean surface where previous marks were erased*” (Papadopoulos, 2007, pp. 305). These meanings, looking at the refugees’ experiences, have strong implications: the first meaning, “rubbing in” and resulting in a wound, represent the dominant one in use; the second meaning, “rubbing away” resulting in the acquisition of a new perspective of life. This new perspective reflects the fact that people may respond emphasizing the renewing rather than the injurious effects: so, psychological reactions to adversity and the consequences of having to go on exile vary from person to person and it depends on multiple factors. These factors range from personal (history, psychological characteristics, coping strategies, status, education), relational (family and community) or of gender, to the circumstances of the devastating events (their predictability, isolation, length), meanings of the devastating events (political, religious, ideological), presence or absence of trust. It could be accurate to assume that the events that a refugee experiences cause some degree of psychological discomfort, or upset, or pain, or disruption or even disturbance.

In order to shed light on a complex model through which looks at the effects of devastating and extreme events, Papadopoulos (2007) elaborated the so-called Trauma Grid. According to him (2007), the range of possible effects of trauma can so fall into three categories: negative, positive and neutral. Regarding the negative effects of trauma, he distinguished between at least three degrees of severity:



- The Ordinary human suffering (OHS) represents the most common and human response to tragedies in life. Suffering does not amount to a pathological condition but is part of life. Using different resources and the support systems, the psychological immune system of a person can be able to elaborate and digest adversities.
- The Distressful psychological reaction (DPR) represents a more severe form of OHS, involving stronger experiences of discomfort, but usually the ordinary human resilience can deal with them without the need of any professional intervention.
- Psychiatric disorders (PD) represent the severest form of negative consequences to extreme event and the most common type of effect is the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Regarding the positive responses to adversities, Papadopoulos (2007) spoke of the Adversity-Activated Development (AAD) (Papadopoulos, 2004; 2006) referring to the positive development as result of being exposed to adversities. Once refugees realise that they have survived, they start to appreciate life in its own right. The trauma literature used different terminologies to address the same positive response to adversity: stress-related growth or post-traumatic growth (Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Folkman, 1997; Harvey, 1996). Regarding post-traumatic growth, Papadopoulos (2007) argued that the central point of post-traumatic growth is trauma, assuming that everybody who is experiencing post-traumatic growth have been traumatised; furthermore, the post-traumatic growth implies that the “growth” occurs after trauma (the term post recalls the post of the PTSD). Whereas, the Adversity-Activated Development assumes that the adversities may still continue, covering the whole migratory experience and that the positive effects may have been experienced even during, not only after, the period of adversities. AAD is generated because adversities expose the limits of individuals, pushing people to the edge of their previous expectations.

Finally, regarding the neutral response to adversities, Papadopoulos spoke about the Resilience. Resilience, in physics, refers to the ability of a body not to alter after being subjected to different severe conditions; that is the reason why it is considered as a neutral effect. Resilience involves qualities that existed before, whereas AAD introduces new characteristics that did not exist before the adversities.

Moreover, the Trauma Grid (2007), not only offers a framework of three possible effects of trauma-positive, negative and neutral-but assists psychologists to hold in mind the totality of the refugee' experiences as they relate to the network of interrelationship across different levels (individual, familiar, communitarian, social-cultural). This aspect is very important because every person can be affected by their family, community and culture in positive or negative ways, constantly influencing the meaning systems of each individual, especially in difficult situation.

### 1.3. Psychological researches among asylum seekers and refugees: an overview

As shown in a recent review (Tessitore & Margherita, 2017), the psychological researches among refugees and asylum seekers, in the international as well as in the Italian context, generally follow two distinct trajectories: one, that could be called "traumatic and post-traumatic trajectory", is guided by a psychiatric and diagnostic model and is focused on the investigation of individual risk and protective factors; the other one, that could be called "contextual and post-migratory factors trajectory", represents the prerogative of a psychosocial perspective.

Following the "traumatic and post-traumatic issue", the wider field of psychological researches into asylum seekers and refugees is focused on mental health. The consequences of trauma, or exposure to extreme events, on mental health is, in fact, the principal focus of a substantial body of current psychological research. It has highlighted an increased risk amongst refugees of developing a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Crepet et al., 2017; Firenze et al., 2016; Fazel et al., 2005; Porter & Haslam, 2005), with high rates of comorbidity between PTSD and depression (Belz, Belz, Özkn, & Graef-Calliess, 2017). Moreover, other psychological disorders, including psychosomatic disorders, emotional distress and anxiety have been observed (Pascucci et al., 2014; Rohlof, Knipscheer & Kleber, 2014). Furthermore, the higher risk of mental health of adult refugees showed that the higher risk of mental health problems persists, even after several years' post-resettlement (Bogic, Njoku, & Priebe, 2015; Bogic et al., 2012).

Although a minor part of the research has investigated protective factors on well-being in the attempt to promote resilience and support (Esses, Hamilton & Gaucher, 2017;

Rousseau & Kyrmaier, 2017), the strong focus on trauma and post-traumatic stress reactions has meant that understanding positive adaptations in refugees has not been well-explored (Arnetz et al., 2013).

In terms of protective factors, research has generally focused on the construct of resilience, which, in general terms, refers to an individual's capacity to face up to events that threaten personal safety/life-threatening events. Since there is no universally accepted definition of resilience that refers to ecological as well as individual dimensions, studies focus mainly on factors that could promote resilient behaviours, ranging from sense of coherence and absence of mental symptoms (Turner et al., 2003) to social support and sense of control over one's life (Hooberman et al., 2010). Overall, it seems that refugees are generally able to cope and adapt to an enormous range of obstacles and challenges (Simich & Andermann, 2014).

Combining trauma and resilience, although different cross-sectional studies (Lee et al., 2014; Wrenn et al., 2011) showed that resilient individuals are less likely to develop PTSD symptoms following a traumatic event, Arnetz et al. (2013) highlighted that, for refugees, resilience seems a significant inverse predictor of psychological distress, but not of PTSD symptoms.

Research into treatment approaches for refugees has also focused on trauma, and is mainly concerned with evaluating the efficacy of existing trauma-focused interventions (Haagen et al., 2017; Tribe, Sendt & Tracy, 2017). It seems that the trauma-focused approach to treating post-traumatic stress in refugees is principally grounded in contemporary cognitive behavioural frameworks. Trauma-focused cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) (Hinton et al., 2009; Hinton et al., 2005; Hinton et al., 2004) and narrative exposure therapy (NET) (Schauer et al., 2011) are the most supported interventions for adult refugees (Nosè et al., 2017; Lambert & Alhassoon, 2015; Slobodin & de Jong, 2015; Palic & Elklit, 2011; Nickerson et al., 2011; Crumlish & O'rouke, 2010; Ehnholt, Smith, & Yule, 2005; Başoğlu et al., 2004; Paunovic & Öst, 2001). Stenmark et al. (2013) confirmed the effectiveness of NET in reducing PTSD and depression scores both for asylum seekers and refugees. The most recent review in this field (Tribe, Sendt & Tracy, 2017) shows that, even if less robustly supported, also culturally sensitive CBT results in symptom relief. In

terms of critical aspects, the literature highlights the use of small sample sizes and the lack of long-term follow-up (Tribe, Sendt & Tracy, 2017) as well as the need to extend interventions to a wide consideration of contextual factors (Lambert & Alhassoon, 2015; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Murray, Davidson & Schweitzer, 2010). Another critical aspect underlined is how the use of interpreters potentially influences the therapeutic process, in particular for the quality of therapeutic alliance (d'Ardenne et al., 2007; Miller et al., 2005) which is particularly important for establishing security with traumatized individuals (Briere & Scott, 2013). Moreover, Droždek (2015) suggested the need to combine multimodal work with the best evidence-based trauma focused interventions. Multimodal interventions aim, in fact, to concurrently address issues of psychological functioning, social and cultural adaptation, physical health and ongoing psychosocial difficulties. This aspect was also underlined by Patel, Williams & Kellezi (2016) who, regarding the methodological and ethical challenges of conducting studies in this field, highlighted also the need of rigorous methods and sensitivity to culture, gender and wider contextual factors.

The “contextual and post-migratory factors trajectory” seems mainly guided by a psychosocial perspective and interested in different issues, such as the processes of integration and access to health care services by asylum seekers and refugees (Bianco et al., 2016; Nante et al., 2016) and the fundamental role played by contextual factors, concentrating on risk as well as the protective role played by post-migratory determinants (Beiser & Hou, 2017; Labys, Dreyer, & Burns, 2017). However, the study of contextual dimensions compared to individual ones is still underdeveloped and needs to be increased (Li, Liddell & Nickerson, 2016).

The main characteristics of these trajectories are the following: on the one hand, the study of the individual dimensions and of the role played by them on well-being and mental health is still separated by the study of the contextual ones which seem have, nevertheless, very important functions in terms of risk as well as protective factors on well being; on the other hand, the “traumatic and post-traumatic issue” is mainly guided by a psychiatric and diagnostic level which would need to be integrate with other dimensions (Tessitore & Margherita, 2017).

In the present chapter it was offered a panoramic of the different levels which cross the displacement phenomenon: social, political, cultural as well as psychological. Focusing on the psychological level, it was showed the psychodynamic perspective on migration and its key points to look at the migration phenomenon which involve the identity, its cultural base as well as the social aspects involved by the traumatic experiences lived in the situation of the so-called man-made disaster. It was presented the model of Renos Papadopoulos, able to look at the asylum seekers and refugees' experience overall, in its temporal and social references as well as to show the need to assume a critical approach able to offer a complex model of trauma which goes well beyond the diagnostic category of PTSD. It was also showed, through an overview of the psychological researches among asylum seekers and refugees that the psychiatric approach focused on the development of posttraumatic syndromes is the wider trajectory of the current studies even if it needs to be integrated by a broader attention to contextual and social factors.

The next chapter will go under the main issue of the present thesis: the links between the experience of living devastating, extreme events and their consequences on the process of storytelling.

## Chapter 2

### TRAUMA AND NARRATIVE: THE DISRUPTION AND RECOVERY OF THE SYMBOLISATION PROCESS

#### *Overview*

The first chapter offered an overview of the different levels involved in migratory phenomenon and clarified the theoretical background which guide the present work.

The present chapter, instead, will be specifically focused on the relationship between trauma and narrative. In the first part of this chapter the way in which the present project looks at the narrative, such as a meaning making process aimed to make sense to the lived experiences, will be outlined. In such terms, many psychological researches have demonstrated the value and the impact that a coherent life-story/personal narrative has for wellbeing and mental health.

Then, the attention will be explicitly focused on the links between trauma and narrative showing the so-called “trauma enigma” (Mucci, 2014): on the one hand, different studies, across time and starting from the researches about trauma and memory, have developed theories and demonstrated the disruptive consequences of traumatic events on the narrative coherence; on the other hand, the recovery of the symbolisation and of the meaning making process disrupted by traumatic memories can be only generated by the possibility to give back to trauma a time frame through the construction of a coherent narrative. In such terms, it will be taken a step back explaining the mechanisms through which the symbolisation process works with the aim to show the fundamental role played on the psyche by the images in their being the first step of the symbolisation process. Explaining this role is fundamental to understand the research questions which guide the present work. In conclusion, the present chapter will finish with a focus on the specific problematic aspects and functions that the narrative device assumes for asylum seekers.

## 2.1. Narrative and psychology: from the “narrative turn” to the narrative approach to the research

In the psychological field, narrative, as paradigm, has come under increasing attention since the the so-called “narrative turn” which promoted an increase in value of the narrative as a way in which human beings actively construct the world as well as a distinctive form of thinking which in human mind live together with the logical-scientific thinking (Bruner, 1986; 1990; 1995a; 1995b; Sarbin, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988). The scientific-logic- or paradigm thinking is a cognitive extensional modality of thinking which operates through abstract concepts with the aim to organize them and to create generalisations always true. The narrative thinking, instead, is a cognitive intentional modality of thinking which, based on the daily reasoning and validating itself in terms of coherence (and not randomness), has the aim to construct stories (not laws).

Grounding its roots in a social-constructivist background, which recognise the construction of meanings about reality as the primary and fundamental function of individuals’ mind, Bruner (1986; 1990) argued that the narrative thinking represents the basis of the human being existence. In such perspective, the narrative thinking is considered as the instrument for the expression of meaningful human events and for the comprehension of the world, of the Self and of the relationship between the Self and Other in a coherence scheme. Bruner (1986) identified a number of defining properties of a narrative: it is composed by a sequence of events; it can be real or imaginary; it aims to forge the links between the exceptional and the ordinary. These properties help us to understand narrative as ways of constructing reality. Thus, narratives have the capacity to imagine and construct other, *possible worlds* (Bruner, 2002) constantly expressing the challenge to make them real. Therefore, the narration of an event can be defined as a recovery of the past as well as the construction of a new narrative; this makes the difference between the historical truth and the narrative truth (which will become the object of the research focused on narrative).

The centrality of narrative for meaning-making processes was firstly highlighted by Ricoeur (1984) who explained how, since we live in a temporal world, we need to create stories to bring order and meaning to the constantly changing flux. Furthermore, we not only create narratives about the world but also we make sense, through narratives, to who we are

and to who we are in relation to others (Ricoeur, 1984). Moreover, narrative provide structure to our sense of selfhood (McAdams, 1985). Through the tale of stories about our lives, to ourselves as well as to others, we constantly create and manage our narrative identity (Ricoeur, 1988). The process of narrative identity formation is dynamic and fluid and occurs in a changing social and personal context. Furthermore, considering that the character of the story told by the narrator it will depend by the broader social and cultural context, *“the study of narrative breaks down the traditional psychological/social distinction and develops a more complex psycho-social subject. The narrator is an active agent who is part of a social world.”* (Murray, 2007, pp. 116).

The capability of narratives to guide the meaning-making processes has important implication for wellbeing and mental health; this is the reason why the use of narrative is particularly pronounced in everyday understanding of disruption (Becker, 1997). As highlighted by Wigren (1994), the creation of narratives is crucial to psychological organization: narratives make connections within the Self, between mind and body and between the Self ad others. In such terms, narratives serve three vital psychological functions: they provide and contain the understandings that allow the use of past experience in understanding, predicting, and responding to future experience (Schank, 1990); they represent an essential part of the fabric of social exchange: people relate to each other, validate each other, indeed construct each other, by sharing stories (Demattos, 1994); finally, sharing stories allows the connections between thoughts and feelings.

From such perspective, not all the stories, told or written, can be considered as narratives. A narrative can be, in fact, defined as on organised interpretation of a sequence of events (Murray, 2007): *“this involves attributing agency to the characters of narrative and inferring causal links between the events”* (Murray, 2007, pp. 113). Narratives are, in fact, constructed when people connect past to future, link affect and cognition, and internalize self-representations and the expectations that accompany them. Although the specific ways stories are told vary both between individuals and between cultures, any story that divides experience episodically, connects events causally, elicits and makes sense of affect, and considers the consequence of events for characters, may be considered a “complete” narrative. Narratives, in fact, to be recognised as such, have to respond to different



properties. In the classic definition, a narrative has a temporal structure, so it is an account with three elements: a beginning, a middle and an end, expressing the so called process of “emplotment” (Ricoeur, 1984) (literally, put the events into a plot). Furthermore, narratives can be defined *particular* because they remind to specific contexts and subjects and, rather than responding to a principle of truth, they respond to a principle of *plausibility*.

Over years, the research focused on narratives has always more tried to operationalise the construct of narrative meaning-making.

More recently, Fivush et al. (2012) has indicated three indicators of narrative meaning making including:

- coherence, such that narratives that follow and elaborate on a sequence of linked actions are more comprehensible;

- presence of internal state language, such as cognitive processing words (e.g., “realise”, “understand”) and emotions words/affective language (such as “that was such a tough time in my life”) which indicate processing of the meaning of the event through a subjective perspective that provides interpretation and evaluation;

- reflective insight, which indicates the degree to which the narrative conveys how the event connects to the past and to the sense of self.

Along these dimensions, above all narrative coherence has received an increasing attention by researches that have highlighted not only its positive correlation with mental health but also its validity for the study of intersubjective links.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, for example, the narrative coherence represents one of the evaluative dimension of the Adulth Attachment Interview (AAI) (George, Kaplan & Main, 1985) developed as measure of attachment styles.

Many researches also demonstrated the negative implications for mental health of incoherent personal narratives (Adler et al., 2012; Lysaker et al., 2002; Semerari & Dimaggio, 2001) as well as the positive correlation between a coherent narrative and the wellbeing (Baerger & McAdams, 1999).

The attempt of the present paragraph was to give an overview of the way in which this work looks at the narrative showing, in particular, the most developed trajectories of narrative research in the field of meaning-making process. Once introduced this aspect, the

next paragraph will specifically show the relationship between traumatic experiences and narrative and the consequences produced by trauma on the meaning-giving function.

## 2.2. Trauma and narrative: links and paradoxes

It is clear that the consequences of living extreme events can be different and can incidence on individuals in different ways; we could say that the trauma consequences are situated in a sort of liminal space between the mind and the body. The following paragraphs will be specifically focused on the way in which traumatic experiences generally disrupt the meaning-making, imagination and symbolisation processes, as well as on the assumption that restoring a narrative coherence is considered the principal aim of a recovering process.

### *2.2.1 Traumatic events as disruptors of narrative*

To explain the consequences of traumatic experiences on narrative, it would be necessary to explain, firstly, the consequences of traumatic experiences on memory which, directly, will influence human being capacity to put in word, and so into a narrative form, past experiences.

By its nature, traumatic experience breaks the continuity and smooth flow of daily life (Bourne & Oliver, 1998). Janet (1909) was the first author who, based solely on the observations of his patients, claimed that traumatic memories were totally lacking of the logical and coherent characteristics which usually characterised the narrative memories. Following this line of theoretical thought, Van der Kolk & Fisler (1995) were the firsts who studied the nature of traumatic memories arriving to confirm Janet's theorisation and showing the sensorial and/or perceptual structure of the traumatic memories which seem to split the memory into various isolated, somato-sensory elements: images, smells or physical sensations. Differently, non traumatic memories can be registered into the declarative or explicit memory, merged in a narrative form (Van der Kolk, McFarlane & Weisaeth, 1996). The subject who experienced traumatic events falls into a "silent terror" (Van der Kolk, 1995) which impedes him to inscribe the event into a coherent narrative and symbolisation.

Although the question is already under debate, recent neurophysiological researches have

confirmed that, during the recall of a traumatic memory, the limbic system and the brainstem (the cerebral areas connected to emotions) are activated, producing bodily alterations and involuntary muscular actions, whereas the frontal lobe, deputated to the possibility to put in words the lived emotion, is completely turned off (Williams et al., 2006).

Since the pioneristic Janet' observation (1909), also developments of research into the neurobiology confirmed the impairments of memory as consequence of traumatic experiences. Van der Kolk (1995) chategorised these functional disturbances as follows: traumatic amnesia, global memory impairment, dissociative processes and sensorimotor organization of traumatic memories. Brewin, Dalgleish & Joseph (1996) suggested that there would be two types of memory associated with trauma: verbal and situational. Verbally-accessible memory (VAM) is responsible for the narrative aspect of the traumatic memory; it would be partially integrated in the autobiographical memory and produces fragmented and dissociated narratives. Situationally-accessible memory (SAM) would be responsible for involuntary flashbacks and of the consequent emotionally threat. Brewin (2001) highlighted also the importance to integrate the information between the systems in order to transform the narrative produced by VAM into a coherent narrative which could be helpful in reducing the flashbacks and their threatening and involuntary nature.

Starting from the findings reached from neurobiological models, theoretical models of PTSD have attempted to in-depth explore the relationships between traumatic memories and traumatic symptoms as well as the traumatic memories' function in patient with PTSD. Numerous clinicians and trauma researchers have confirmed that PTSD patients' trauma memories are disorganized and/or fragmented and that, as treatment proceeds, memories can become more organized and detailed. Over the years, these observations have led to different inferences: fragmented and/or disorganized trauma memories (also termed FDTM) could play an important role in developing and/or maintaining PTSD symptoms; the treatment should be aimed to produce more coherent, organized, and detailed trauma narratives; the fragmented memories can be an index of the degree of information-processing undergone by trauma victims and can give information about the tratment progress (Amir et al., 1998; van der Kolk and Fisler, 1996; Foa et al., 1995; Foa & Kozak, 1993; Herman, 1992; Kilpatrick et al., 1992; van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1991). More recent researches have

also confirmed that the emergence of psychopathological symptoms could depend on whether the traumatic representation has been successfully assimilated and reconciled with the prior autobiographical information (Brewin, Dalgleish, & Joseph, 1996; Ehlers & Clark, 2000).

Psychoanalysts, cognitivists and neurobiologist agree upon the fact that the fragmentation/dissociation of the traumatic memories is one of the major effect produced by trauma and that this effect has direct consequences on the way in which individuals put in words the traumatic experiences (Mucci, 2014). It is, in fact, renowned that the fundamental memory processes of coding, consolidation and retrieval constitute also the substrates of narrative (Kotre, 1995; Siegel, 1995; Mancuso & Sarbin, 1983). This aspect makes explicit the direct relationship between trauma and narrative. From a psychoanalytical perspective, it has been demonstrated how trauma, due to its intensity, leads to a collapse of the construction of the meaning-making processes (Levine, 2014; Bohleber, 2007), disrupting the capacity for representation of mentalisation (Levine, 2014). As suggested by Janoff-Bullman (1992), traumatic events disrupt the meaning-making process because such catastrophic experiences challenge our perception of the world and of ourself with the consequence that, due to their incongruity, they cannot be easily integrated into our life story. In other terms, as highlighted by Neimeyer (2000), dramatic life events, especially traumatic events, not only introduce something of radically incoherent into the plot of a person's prior narrative, but they also invalidate its core emotional themes and goals. So traumatic memories can be seen as "pre-narrative", formed by unintegrated sensations and perceptions, which usually resist to be put into the conscious "master narrative" of our lives (Neimeyer, 2002). In such terms, as highlighted by Wigren (1994), trauma constantly disrupts narrative processing at two levels: at a specific level traumatic events disrupt the narrative coherence of a text, on a more general level the disruption regards the whole life-story of the individual.

In terms of research, there is a growing body of research that aims to explore different aspects of the trauma survivors' narratives. All these researches are mainly focused on the construct of narrative coherence. Regarding relationship between narrative coherence and mental health, different authors (Amir et al., 1998; Beaudreau, 2007; Brown & Heimberg,

2001; Suedfeld, Fell, & Krell, 1998) highlighted that more complex and articulated narratives are usually associated with fewer symptoms of post-traumatic stress and anxiety. Moreover, O’Kearney & Perrott (2006) in their meta-analysis found significant relationships between trauma symptoms and sensory/perceptual references and disrupted temporal structure in narratives. Similarly, other studies have noted that trauma narratives of severely distressed individuals were often low on coherence, limited in detail, and generally less organized (Crespo & Fernández-Lansac, 2016; Berliner et al., 2003; Burke & Bradley, 2006) than general population. Other studies also showed that the ability to write a coherent story after experiencing traumatic events is positively correlated with better recovery and coping (Freda & Martino, 2015; Margherita, Martino, Gargiulo, 2013; Gidron et al., 2002; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; Pennebaker & Susman, 1988).

### *2.2.2 The “trauma enigma”: narrative of the story and its unimaginableness*

In line with Janet (1925), the present thesis looks at memory as the action to tell a story.

Tell stories, as in the talking cure, or rather the action to put disruptive memories and unsuitable physical sensations in words, with a sequence of meanings, it has always been indicated as one of the principle therapeutical factor. In other words, people construct stories to make sense of their lives; therapists and their clients co-construct new narratives to replace disorganized or incoherent stories of the Self. As argued by Brewin, Dalgleish & Joseph (1996), by processing and integrating memories into a coherent narrative form, survivors of trauma may be better able to make sense of their traumatic experiences, and these memories consequently lose their threatening nature and become reconciled (Zoellner, Alvarez-Conrad & Foa 2002; Creamer, Burgess & Pattison 1992). Crossley (2000) explains that the act of narrative structuring involves the process of cognitively creating a coherent representation of the trauma in the context of an individual’s overall life story. In this way, the narrative is the mechanism for adapting to stressful experiences and for restoring the sense of coherence (McNally, 2003). Repeating and creating narratives of traumatic memories is believed to provide individuals with the ability to organize, structure, and make meaning out of their experiences. If coherence is attained, further rumination and preoccupation with the traumatic event can ultimately cease (Briere & Scott, 2006).

These assumptions are confirmed also by different researches that noted how successful treatment of traumatic stress symptoms are associated with improved insight and narrative coherence as well as decreased disorganisation (van Minnen et al., 2002; Foa, Molnar & Cashman 1995).

But what is the reason why the narrative of the trauma story is so important?

The psychoanalysis leads back this importance to the fact that, for traumatised people, narrative can become a testimony. As highlighted by Grand (2000), the narrative of the traumatic experience could be seen as a progressive process from the no-linguistic to the linguistic level, from the fragmentation to the cohesion, from loneliness to reciprocity. In other words, narrating traumatic experiences helps to re-connect the subject with others and organises the Self (Auerhahn & Prelinger, 1983). The connection with another emotionally-connected individual generates the symbolic representation for what it was, by its nature, beyond the words and beyond representation. In the trauma, form and representation have been annihilated and the possibility to put the events in words, to narrate, to restore a meaning and so a symbolic twine depends on the possibility to build a new twine in which past, present and future re-acquire a possible sense and a possible space. The challenge is, so, construct a new temporal frame and transform something unimaginable into imaginable. Furthermore, for traumatised people symbolise and making a sense are necessary to contact emotions and reactions. Recovering the symbolisation process and putting in words into a coherent narrative are all signs that the survivor has “forgiven” (Mucci, 2014) where this forgiveness is not related to the possibility to forgive the perpetrator but to the whole capability of the subject to overcome the trauma. In the previous chapter it has highlighted how psychoanalysis always more looks at the social nature of traumatic events, meant as real experience of traumatising. The social nature of extreme events is strengthened by the need for anyone who works with traumatised people to “look” at the traumatic experience, not carrying on the role of who prefers not to see. According to Mucci (2014), this is the moment in which the trauma, from its being a private question, acquires a social and political meaning: the civil and ethical responsibility for anyone who works with traumatised people to help people in recalling trauma, so developing the historic reality of extreme events (Bohleber, 2007). Clearly, a timing, able to respect the subject’ time, becomes fundamental

as well as the construction of a trust atmosphere in which trauma can find a symbolic and verbal form and be elaborated.

In these paragraphs it was showed the disruption of the symbolisation process operated by traumatic memories and the consequence of this disruption for the narrative coherence, as well as, the need, in order to recover the symbolisation disrupted, to help traumatised individuals to restoring the meaning-making processes. In the next paragraph, it will take a step back explaining the mechanisms through which the symbolisation process works. This purpose it will be done starting from the importance that dreams and nightmares have for traumatised people in the attempt to demonstrate the fundamental role played by the iconic register on the psyche.

Processing and elaborating this topic is helpful to understand the research questions which guide the present project.

### 2.3. Symbol and images: what role of the iconic for the psyche?

According to Freud (1900), the creation of a symbol was the consequence of a link between an internal psychic event, that he defined a “thing representation”, to another psychic event, a psychological “word representation”. In psychology, the symbolisation process is usually put close to the representation process; the term “symbol”, in fact, points out a sort of configuration (figurative or auditory) which “represents” what we use to think, recall or communicate. The symbolisation processes are considered, therefore, the capability of the psyche to put in form, into images and representations the emotional experience, in the attempt to confer to it a possible mentalization.

As highlighted in the previous paragraphs, the traumatised mind is characterised by disintegrating, dissociative and potentially rupturing processes. However, psychoanalytical studies have shown how the dreams of traumatised people can represent the first, rudimental attempt to find a symbolic and verbal form of trauma (Varvin, 2012). They seem to express the attempt to connect implicit and explicit memory and to achieve containment and integration of disorganised imaginary elements into a symbolic mode of functioning (Rosenbaum & Varvin, 2007). Dreaming may be considered as a central part of the mind’s work with un-metabolised, trauma-related elements (Hartmann, 1984; Bion, 1977) and

working with dreams and especially nightmares of traumatised patients has proven to be of great importance in aiding the traumatised mind to restore its symbolic function (Pöstenyi, 1996; Adams-Silvan & Silvan, 1990; Hartmann, 1984).

But what are the mechanisms through which dreams work and that make the dreams of traumatised individuals so important?

This importance could be attributed to the role played by the images which, as shown by the psychoanalytic perspective, have to be considered not only one of the principal element of the expressive system of dreams but also an expressive system of the whole human being mind. The expression “thinking through images” was used firstly by Freud (1922) to indicate a modality of thinking nearest to the unconscious processes than to the classic thinking through words. Edelman (1922) also defined the iconic device as an essential device for the experiences’ categorisation and for their creative elaboration. Bion (1962), further, explained the role played by the alpha function (a mind function continuously operating in individuals) in transforming the proto-sensorial and proto-emotional perceptions into images, pictograms, first elements usable for thinking. As highlighted by Ferro (2002), a functioning human mind always creates images. An image, from his perspective, can be considered as a wide number of pictograms which represent the first step of the transformation’ device which conducts to the thinking. The emotional experiences which we live daily are constantly transformed into images and visual thoughts giving to the iconic register a structural function for the human mind’ organisation. Boccara (2005) described two modalities through which imaginative processes are interlaced with the thinking ones. One process is described through the path that proceeds from words to visual image which in turn evokes memories, sensations, thoughts and other images. The other one, instead, proceeds from images to words: images, through a significant process of recognising and elaboration, become words representations and then, conscious thoughts. In the last situation, images are so considered as proto-communications of aspects that are searching for a figurative space. The last process is the process followed by dreams which, based on images, represent a way to convert and transform unthinkable emotional experiences into words and thoughts. This is the reason why the dreams of traumatised people appear so important for the recovering process. As claimed by Boccara (2005), ‘*to become thinkable*,



*some emotions resort to the iconic as first step to the symbolisation, which active a new form of content-container to manage the thinkable emotion, putting it into a figure [...]”<sup>4</sup>* (Boccaro, 2005, pp. 26).

Furthermore, the hypothesis that human mind continuously works through images it was also confirmed by neurosciences. Damasio (1994) have demonstrated that the images, through which our brain works, are mental configurations composed by elements belonging to each sensorial modality.

Starting from these premises and coming back to trauma, through the disruption of the symbolisation processes, in other words, traumatic memories occlude the preconscious function of the mind usually designated to the transformation of emotional experiences into images and to link these images to a coherent narrative. The sensorial perceptions, the physical sensations and the dissociative memories which usually traumatised individuals experience can be read as expression of rough emotions which struggle with finding a mental representation, with starting the first step to become thinkable. In this sense, the images can have a fundamental role to gradually guide the recovery of the symbolisation process from sensorial perceptions to always more elaborated forms of thoughts and narratives.

The previous paragraphs have explained the link between trauma and narrative showing the consequences and the implications of traumatic experiences on the narrative coherence. It is clear that what explained it is relevant for asylum seekers as individuals who experienced and lived different type of extreme events. However, the “narrative device” for asylum seekers is not only a relevant topic because of the traumatic experiences lived and their consequences on narrative, but also because it assumes different and ambivalent configurations and functions which will be showed in the next paragraph.

#### 2.4. Narrative and asylum seekers: the polyvalent function

Narrative for asylum seekers can be defined “polyvalent” because of different criticisms and problematics which influence not only asylum seekers but also the clinical and research’ relationship with them on different levels.

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<sup>4</sup> author’s translation

In the complex juridical path which characterises the procedure for the asylum granting, the narrative acquires, in fact, a central significance assuming the features of an “arena” (Mencacci, 2015) where asylum seekers metaphorically “fight” for their international protection requests.

By virtue of the recent European norms, the life story tale, precisely the so-termed *escape memory narrative*, represents the principal instrument through which the international protection can be recognised or denied. This aspect has many consequences which lend to the narrative device a very porous and ambivalent consistency.

In such contexts, what happens to the narrative as process through which make sense to the experiences? What shapes can it assume? And what are the consequences of these shapes on clinical as well as on research practice?

First, from an anthropological point of view, due to its evaluative character, narratives made by asylum seekers are produced into high-controlled contexts, where the power relationship is strongly asymmetric, the cultural and expressive indexes can be not necessarily known or shared by asylum seekers and the escape memory narrative ends up to become a narrative produced by different actors (generally also by the social workers who work in the hospitality shelters) and on which the main character has a very limited control (Sorgoni, 2011). In such terms, the escape memory narrative acquires the characteristic of a “proof of truth”, calling into question the credibility of the speaker and of the relationship between his/her identity and the narrative. In the specific context of the asylum system, the narrative device assumes, therefore, ambivalent characteristics. Asylum seekers themselves appear strongly ambivalent in front of the story-telling practice: on one hand they seem to recognise the role played by the escape memory narrative in legitimating their experiences; on the other hand, they usually demonstrate an avoidant attitude to the narrative practice.

Second, as shown in the previous paragraphs, for people who lived traumatic experiences, the possibility to put life story events into a coherent narrative is strongly invalidated. At the same time, once called to narrate their memory escape history in front of an evaluative committee, asylum seekers are evaluated on two different levels. On the one hand, they are evaluated for their capability to report a coherent memory escape narrative, making the narrative coherence “proof of truth”. On the other hand, their narrative is also evaluated on

the basis of their mental health status that, more is compromised by traumatic experiences, more seems to give testimony of truth. Here is located the biggest paradox of the asylum granting and here is also located one of the most dangerous drift for mental health care services: the recourse to clinical devices for the research of post-traumatic symptoms, categorizable into universally accepted diagnostic labels.

Kirmayer (2003), speaking about the role of the narrative device into the mental health care services, claimed about a “failure of imagination” that can be tracked into the difficulties lived both by asylum seekers and clinicians: asylum seekers live a failure of imagination in building a bridge between their country of origin and the hosting one as well as clinicians live a failure in conceiving and understanding the refugee’s predicament with the expectations to cure traumatic wounds.

Obviously, the various and problematic aspects assumed by narratives for asylum seekers have deep consequences on clinical as well as on research practice contributing to make the relationship between asylum seekers and clinicians/researchers very complex on different levels.

Due to the strong evaluative context in which the asylum seekers’ experience is placed, aims and functions of clinical and research practices are usually overlapped in asylum seekers’ mind with aims and functions of the asylum granting procedures. In other words, the exploratory aims of the research and the supportive aims of the clinical practice are usually misunderstood and replaced by evaluative aims. This aspect clearly permeates and produces a specific relational field between asylum seekers and clinicians/researchers that need to be constantly thought and that opens wider and still unexplored questions about the possibility to reach “deep” and “authentic” levels of relationships with this population.

In such context, more than in others, setting up a mental and physical space in which these dynamics can be, first, thought and, then, expressed and analysed, becomes fundamental for any type of intervention. All these aspects single also out the deep meaning of the word “hospitality” which means, first of all, to “host in mind” these dynamics and the way in which these dynamics are acted into the relationship and, then, to “host (them) in a secure space” where they could be clarified, expressed and thought.

Furthermore, narratives are vehicled by languages. In clinical as well as in research

practice, the difference between the languages spoken by asylum seekers and by clinicians/researchers, the cultural aspects vehicled by these differences, the absence of the mother tongue through which emotions and experience can be authentically shared, arise additional difficulties. All these levels, as a rule, are embodied in the figure of interpreters, who represent the “third” in the relational field (Varvin, 2014; Tribe & Kneefe, 2009; Hanssen & Alpers, 2010; Raval & Tribe, 2003) and whose presence, functions and aims, that change depending on contexts, need to be costantly thought and clarified. The interpreter, in fact, not only triangulates the relationship and embodies a translation function that, if well trained, could also produce different benefits (Varvin, 2014) but, representing mirrors and mouthpieces of different cultures, languages and stories, assumes also the function of an important mediation that contextualises cultural representations and practices (Sturm, Nadig & Moro, 2011).

This chapter and the previous one have clarified the theoretical background which guided the present work; the next one will present the first explorative study conducted in the attempt to explore the asylum seekers’ experiences and to identify the main issue on which to focus the attention.

## **Chapter 3**

### **THE EXPLORATORY STORY**

#### *Overview*

Considering the complexity involved in the forced migratory experience, it was thought that would be appropriate to start the investigation with an exploratory study.

As such, the present chapter will show an exploratory study conducted at the end of the first year of the PhD course. The general aim of the study was to explore meanings and representations of the migratory experience of asylum seekers hosted in Italy who were waiting for the evaluation by the Territorial Committees. The study was also conducted also in order to understand and underline criticisms and problematic aspects in the research with asylum seekers and refugees and to identify the main issue on which to focus the attention. The present chapter will be focused on the procedures and the results of the exploratory study and will end with a focus on the implications that the study has had for the re-definition of the whole research-project. This study is part of a paper that was submitted to a journal and is currently under review.

### 3.1. Introduction

The following exploratory study was realised through the drafting of a protocol agreement between the Department of Humanities of the University of Naples Federico II and the Social Cooperative “La Rinascente 2.0”, a private cooperative which manages some male Extraordinary Reception Centres where asylum seekers are hosted while waiting for a verdict on their application for international protection. The Social Cooperative “La Rinascente 2.0” autonomously expressed the will to collaborate with the Department of Humanities and, in particular with the tenure of Dynamic Psychology which supervises the present research-project, for the realisation of the present study.

The study had an exploratory nature and aimed to generally explore the forced migratory experience, in its broader social and individual significance, through the psychodynamic perspective.

In particular, it sought to:

- explore risk and protective factors starting from the constructs mainly investigated by international literature (traumatic and resilient levels);
- explore the meanings and representations which asylum seekers attribute to their experience of migration, in terms of identity as well as social experience considering also if and how traumatic and resilient levels vary the experiences lived by asylum seekers.

### 3.2. Materials and Methods

#### *3.2.1 Setting and Participants*

The study was conducted in two male Extraordinary Reception Centres (CAS) located in the Campania Region of Southern Italy.

Before proceeding with data collection, the asylum seekers, who could speak English<sup>5</sup>, were met collectively at the Centre, informed of the aims of the study, and asked to express interest in participating. The role of the psychologist/researcher was clearly described as

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<sup>5</sup> The choice of the English was made due to the author’ knowledge of this language.

well as was clarified that the research had no influence on the asylum granting procedures. Those steps were fundamental to inscribe the relationship in the secure climate necessary to enable the research to go ahead, and to assure participants that the interviews had nothing to do with official assessment of refugee status by Territorial Committees. All these steps were made in the presence of an interpreter provided by the Centre.

Considering the aims of the study, participants were selected on the basis of the following inclusion criteria:

- able to speak, write and read in English;
- waiting for evaluation by Territorial Committees.

Out of a total of 28 asylum seekers met, 3 declared themselves unavailable to take part in the study, and 5 were unable to read or write in English. Thus, a total of 20 asylum seekers took part in the study. All participants, according to the Italian Ministry of Interior data (2017), arrived in Italy through the main route of the Central Mediterranean Sea from Libya.

Each participant was met individually for three times, in the presence of an interpreter, in a room made available by the Centre. In the first meeting, they signed their informed consent to participate in the research and completed the form with social-demographic information (Tab.1). The consent form and the study protocol were approved by the Appointed Committee and carried on in accordance with the World Health Organization ethics guidelines (2011) and with the International Ethical Guidelines for Health-related Research Involving Humans (Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences, 2016).

In a second meeting, surveys were administered to collect quantitative data and, in the third meeting, an in-depth interview was conducted.

Tab. 1 Participants Characteristics

Number of participants	Sex	Mean Age	Country of origin	Residency	Mean time arrival in Italy
20 asylum seekers	M	26,65	Sub-Saharan Africa 4 Ghana 1 Burkina Faso 15 Nigeria	CAS	3 months

### 3.2.2 Instruments

In order to address the aims of the study, a mixed methodology was used.

Firstly, in order to explore risk and protective factors, traumatic symptoms and resilience levels were taken into consideration, following the constructs largely used in literature.

Therefore, two quantitative instruments were used:

- *PTSD Checklist-Civilian Version (PCL-C)* (Weathers, Litz, Herman, Huska, & Keane, 1993), a 17-item self-report measure reflecting DSM-IV symptoms of PTSD. Each item is on a scale indicating the degree to which the respondent had been affected by a particular symptom from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). PCL-C scores ranged from 17 to 74 and the cut-off for individuating the presence of PTSD is 50.
- *Resilience Scale (RS)* (Wagnild & Young, 1993a, b), is a 25-item self-report measure in which answers are organised on a seven-point Likert Scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Scoring and interpretation correspond to the following patterns: 25-100 very low resilience; 101-115 low resilience; 116-130 moderately low resilience; 131-145 moderately high resilience; 145-160 high resilience; 161-175 very high resilience.

The in-depth exploration of meanings and representations of asylum seekers' experiences was conducted through an in-depth interview characterised by the following account: "Would you like to tell me something about you...something about your experience...". This approach was chosen in the attempt to explore the migratory experience as an identity issue as well as social experience.



### 3.2.3 Data Analysis

Through a statistical descriptive analysis, mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) of the quantitative data were calculated. Then the results obtained by PCL-C and RS<sup>6</sup> were dichotomized and used as descriptive variables during the analysis of the interviews.

The interviews, audio-recorded and transcribed *verbatim*, were analysed using the software T-Lab (Lancia, 2004), a quali-quantitative automatic software for text analysis that, through the study of the vocabulary, aims to identify shared themes or issues associated with the topic being researched (Bolasco, 1999).

T-Lab allows to carry on different type of analysis of the texts.

Firstly, it is necessary a preliminary treatment of the text using the software tool to clean the corpus and prepare it for analysis (i.e. the software allows to unify different words with the same meaning in order to optimise the analysis).

Then, the researcher can choose the type of analysis to carry on.

In order to explore meanings and representation of the experiences lived by participants, a specific thematic analysis was chosen: the Thematic Analysis of Elementary Context. It consists of a thematic analysis conducted on the elementary context units (also termed e.c.u.) which are sentences, paragraphs or short texts characterised by the same patterns of keywords identified by the software. This type of analysis identifies the interviewees' lexical choices of a specific elementary context and carries out on them co-occurrence and comparative analysis. The results are few significant thematic clusters that should be considered as contextual field of meanings, "lexical worlds" (Reinert, 1995) shared by the participants. Specifically, the software creates automatically each cluster, grouping the lemmas (the keywords) that co-occur in the same elementary context. Therefore, each cluster consists of a set of e.c.u. and is described through a groups of lemmas or keywords that are ranked by the software according to the decreasing value of  $\chi^2$ . Finally, the software

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<sup>6</sup> For the variables PTSD yes/PTSD no we used the scores of the PCL-C referring to the cut-off value of 50: 0-50=PTSD no; 50 or above PTSD yes. For the variables RS low/RS high we used the scores of the RS dividing the scoring patterns into two ranges: 25-130= RS low; 131-175= RS high.

allows to project the clusters emerged from the analysis on a factorial plane that give some important information also regarding the relationship between each cluster (allowing to look and consider the way in which clusters are positioned on it).

The Thematic Analysis of Elementary Context allows also to associate to each interview some descriptive variables in order to verify their relationship with the analysed text and with the clusters emerged. In this manner, the software allows you to understand if they influence, are more or less specifically referred to a specific thematic cluster. The final graphical representation will give an overview of the way in which clusters and variables are positioned on the factorial plane. The variables can or not be specifically referred to a thematic cluster, so can or not “fall” into a specific cluster, that is, being relevant in a specific portion of text which has contributed to the creation of that cluster. In such terms, looking at the way in which variables are distributed on the factorial plane it could be inferred the relationship between a specific variable and the emerged themes. In the present study, the dichotomised results obtained by PCL-C and RS were associated to each interview and considered as descriptive variables. This procedure allowed to explore the relationship between traumatic and resilient levels with the emerged themes; if and how different traumatic and resilient levels influenced more or less some experiences lived by participants.

### 3.3. Results

#### *3.3.1 Descriptive Analysis*

Through a statistical descriptive analysis, mean values and standard deviation of PCL-C and RS were calculated (Tab. 2).

*Tab.2 Descriptive Analysis of traumatic and resilient levels*

<b>Instrument</b>	<b>Cut-off</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>PTSD Check list (PCL-C)</b>	50	47	13,27
<b>Resilience Scale (RS)</b>	131-145 moderately high 145-160 high 161- 175 very high 25-100 very low 101-115 low 116 - 130 moderately low	141. 15	21.24

Regarding traumatic symptoms, the results showed that the mean value for the participants is lower compared to the cut-off for the PTSD diagnosis. Specifically, only six participants presented a score linked to a diagnosis of PTSD.

Regarding the evaluation of the adaptive functioning through resilience levels, the results show mean levels correspondent to the range “moderately high resilience”.

### *3.3.2 Interviews Analysis: Thematic Analysis of Elementary Context*

The interviews analysis produced 4 thematic clusters. They will be illustrated using the ascending hierarchical classification starting with those that are statistically significant (threshold level  $p=.05$ ). Clusters were named and for each of them were identified the most significant lemmas according to the decreasing value of  $\chi^2$  (Tab. 3).

Tab. 3 Clusters and lemmas

% Clusters	Label	Principal lemmas sorted by weighed descending order $\chi^2$
Cluster 1 is composed by 82 e.c.u. out of total 280. 29,29%	<i>A godforsaken place</i>	Libya (59.20); place (20.59); attack (20.59); hit (18.66); war (18); dangerous (17.90); wait (11.78); decide (9.18).
Cluster 2 is composed by 79 e.c.u. out of total 280. 28,21%	<i>From death to life across the sea</i>	die (46.98); rescue (41.49); water (34.08); hours (34.08); Sicily (31.44); saved (25.58); people (22.92); afraid (18.12); boat (16.13).
Cluster 3 is composed by 66 e.c.u. out of total 280. 23,57%	<i>Memories from the past</i>	Father (100.10); mother (70.3); school (63.83); Africa (60.00); sister (58.43); grow_up (29.93); life (28.37); dead (26.32).
Cluster 4 is composed by 53 e.c.u. out of total 280. 18,93%	<i>Searching for a land of care</i>	help (89); ok (50.11); pocket_money (49.85); work (43.49); support (34.19); pay (33.21); boss (33.2); document (23.912); camp (19.72); freedom (11.35); problem (11.347).

The first cluster, *A godforsaken place* (29,29%), describes the traumatic event of the experience in *Libya* (*place*). Here lemmas like *war*, *dangerous* that refer to the Libyan social-political situation, which denies the possibility of creating a future, and lemmas (*hit*, *attack*) that recall concrete events of violence can be found:

*In Libya they could kill you every second...every day they kill people...if they see you they beat you and they put you in prison without reason. You can't eat or drink. When I arrived I say to myself "this place is more dangerous than your country". [score 120.482]*

The second cluster, *From death to life across the sea* (28,21%), describes the experience of the journey (*boat*) which all migrants to Italy have in common (*Sicily*). Lemmas like *water*, *hours* recall a time characterised by fear (*afraid*), where the time of fear (*die*) was accompanied by a time of hope and being safe (*saved*, *rescue*):

*On the boat...oh...hard...it was a hard experience...the rough water...the water entered into the boat. We spent nine hours and twenty minutes before the rescue saved us.* [score 165.113]

The third cluster, *Memories from the past* (23,57%), represents the identity cluster in which the significant relationships of life (*father, mother, sister, grandmother*), the process of *growing up*, the Motherland (*Africa*) are included. In this cluster it can be also found the reasons why the participant decided to leave their country, which in most cases are related to difficult family circumstances and to *life* or *death* situations:

*In Africa everything is possible. Your uncle could decide to kill you for the inheritance and you can only run away. My uncle killed my father, my sister and wanted to kill me too.*  
[score 89.130]

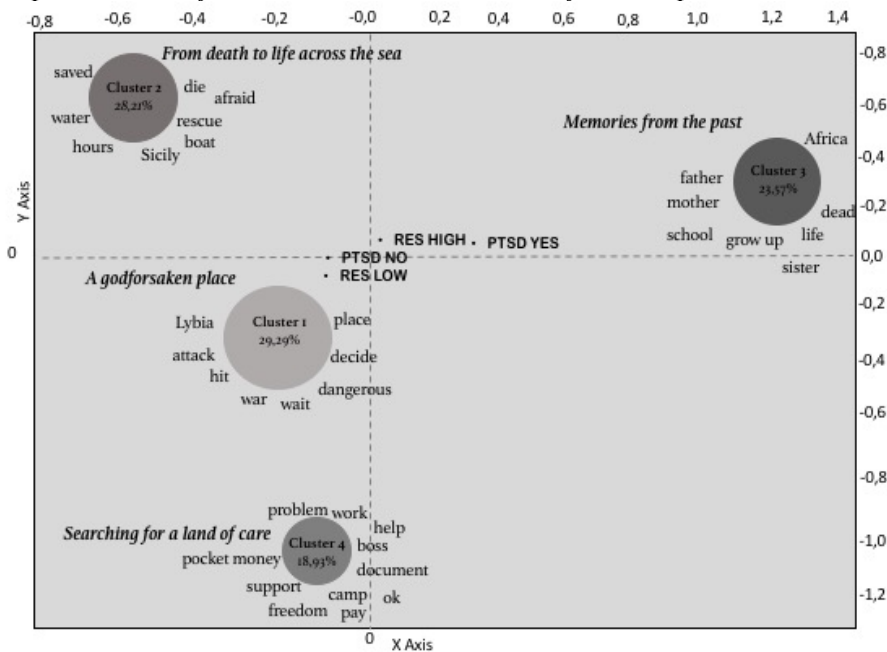
The last cluster, *Searching for a land of care* (18,93%), depicting the post-migration experience, represents the participants' present, configured as a waiting time. This cluster included lemmas like *camp* and *bosses* (which is how they refer to the Centre and the owners) to describe where the participants are hosted, and lemmas connected to *help* and *support*, especially in the economic sense (*pocket money*), which is necessary to guarantee safety and *freedom*. Moreover, this cluster also describes diverse concerns expressed by participants that range from the slowness of asylum procedures (*document*) to the absence of activities (*work*):

*I am fine, the camp is good, as are the bosses... Pocket money helps me to survive. My problem is that I want my documents. I want to work but without documents I can't work.*  
[score 219.359]

As shown in the Graph 1, the descriptive variables PTSD yes/PTSD no and RS high/RS low are positioned in the origin point of the factorial plane. When it occurs, it means that

the descriptive variables are no really descriptive of any themes emerged by the analysis. In other words, not falling in any clusters, they have no influence on the emerged themes which describe the lived experiences.

Graphic 1 Representation of Clusters and variables on the factorial plane



### 3.4. Discussions

The statistical descriptive analysis gave some useful information regarding the dimensions of trauma as well as of resilience, which the international literature on asylum seekers and refugees has focused on. In terms of protective factors, the results showed mean levels of moderately high resilience; this data could be connected with the fact that migrants arriving in Italy represent a group that decided to leave Libya, to resist, to live, even if facing death. In terms of risk factors, in line with the wider international literature on the “refugee trauma discourse”, the presence or absence of PTSD was evaluated. From the results, although most of our participants had been imprisoned and tortured in Libya, only six of them presented a PTSD. The data seems in line with Priebe, Giacco & El-Nagib (2016) who highlighted that, despite the use of PTSD category, the effective presence of a PTSD is observed only in 15% of the refugee population, confirming that what is “traumatic” and the

way in which an individual may react to traumatic events, varies from person to person. The fact that the descriptive variables PTSD yes/PTSD no (positioning themselves in the origin point of the factorial plane) had no influence on the emerged themes, could suggest that trauma has a homogenous quality that could mark or not all the experiences the participants had to face, confirming the need to integrate the diagnostic categories with other dimensions.

Interesting data were identified in the time references that characterise all clusters emerged by the analysis. All clusters spoke about time: a past time, which is that of their origins (*Memories from the past*), the journey time, which is the time of the concrete violence and of the boat journey described by hours (*A godforsaken place* and *From death to life across the sea*), a present time which is the time of waiting and suspension (*Searching for a land of care*). The time references emerging in all clusters confirmed the need to look at the asylum seekers' experience overall, in its temporal dimensions and complexity. In this sense, thematic clusters seem to recall the different phases of the refugee experience highlighted by Papadopoulos (2002). *Memories from the past*, with references to identity and the reasons why participants decided to leave, could recall the *anticipation* phase in which an individual perceives the danger and decides the best option for dealing with it. *A godforsaken place* and *From death to life across the sea*, representing the phase of the concrete violence and fear, seems to recall the *phase of devastating events*, the phase which researches among asylum seekers and refugees generally focuses on. Finally, *Searching for a land of care*, the post-migration experience, represents the *survival phase*, taken as the phase of identity and physical suspension. In line with Papadopoulos (2002) who suggested that researchers should not focus only on the devastating events phase, the "traditionally traumatic" one, the results seem to suggest, to quote Kahn (1963), a "cumulative trauma" that could be activated by pre-migratory experiences, amplified by the migratory one and, eventually, made chronic by the post-migratory phase. Thus, all phases of an asylum seeker's experience could potentially have a traumatising quality.

Finally, the interviews were aimed to simultaneously explore the migratory experience as identity as well as social experience. Looking at the way the clusters are positioned on the factorial plane (Graph 1), a split emerges between the identity dimension and the social experience. *Memories from the past*, which represents the identity dimension, appears

isolated in the right quadrant confirming the identity fracture (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1990) that the migration experience produced. Whereas the clusters in the left quadrant (*A godforsaken place, From death to life across the sea* and *Searching for a land of care*) representing the concrete migratory experience which comes across the tortures lived in Libya, the terror into the sea and the adaptation in the hosting country, seem to provide testimony of a new identity, that of the migrant, the only one that can be experienced, thought and expressed.

### 3.5. Implication for the research-project

The exploratory study was useful in order to understand the complexity of the asylum seeker's experience and to confirm the need to look at their experience overall and through a complex and multidimensional model.

The results, showing a low presence of PTSD in participants (six out to twenty) and an absence of influence of traumatic levels on the emerged themes, confirmed the need to avoid making a direct causal link between refugee experience and the development of post-traumatic syndromes, bearing in mind the specific nature of each individual phase of these experiences. These aspects are in line with a wide range of psychanalytical literature that highlighted how, because of the complexity of the refugee experience and of the prolonged and repeated traumatic experiences that many refugees are exposed to, approaches focused solely on symptoms should be integrated with ones that allow for self-management and growth (Varvin, 2016; Papadopoulos, 2002).

This aspect had strong implications in terms of research because, on a methodological level, it suggests the need to integrate the use of quantitative instruments with the use of qualitative ones aimed at an in-depth comprehension of the experiences.

Regarding quantitative instruments, the exploratory study showed the limits of the used quantitative surveys that were not specifically developed (in both cases of PCL-C and RS) or tested (in the only case of the RS) on refugees or asylum seekers. This aspect could be very important for taking into consideration the cultural appropriateness of the instruments (Patel & Williams 2014) and confirmed the need to search for and use instruments developed



or adapted on non-western population which can be able to reflect their experiences and the cultural meanings of their experiences as deeply as possible.

Regarding qualitative instruments, the present work looks at the qualitative narrative enquiry (Bruner, 1990, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988) as a very privileged vehicle for the construction and organisation of the subjective experience. The qualitative research, with its attention to the particularity of each individual experience, emerged from the exploratory study as a very useful method for exploring in-depth the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees who constitute culturally diverse and heterogeneous populations.

However, as expected, the narrative method, which during the explorative study had in the in-depth interview its privileged instrument, presented different problematic aspects.

From a qualitative observation of the interviews produced by participants, they were very brief (mean of total words count 654), lacking of narrative links and of emotional and cognitive dimensions. Moreover, experiences were narrated as a cliché, in a descriptive manner, with the usual concreteness that characterise individuals who have experienced devastating events and whose symbolic processes are inadequate or disrupted. During the exploratory study it was also observed that participants effectively experienced various difficulties in doing the interviews which were noticed in their general difficulty to approach to their history, to follow a logical thread during the narrative as well as in the continuous disruptions in the story telling. If on the one hand, these difficulties could have been connected to the “mother tongue issue” and referred to the problematic aspects of narrating their own lifestory in a language different from their mother tongue; it is also important to highlight that participants were purposefully chosen by virtue of their knowledge of the English language spoken and written in order to allow an easier lifestory telling (actually, participants came from Anglophone country and learned English since they started primary school). Moreover, the presence of the interpreter emerged as a useful presence in facilitating the story tale as well as in representing a cultural bridge able to reduce the distance between the interviewer and the speaker.

On the other hand, these difficulties seemed to be more strongly connected to the unavoidable relationship between traumatic experiences, traumatic memories and disruption of meaning-making processes.

The explorative study demonstrated, therefore, the limits of a “pure” narrative instrument, as the in-depth interview. The simple account “*Would you like to tell me something about you...something about your experience...*”, if efficient in exploring the asylum seekers experience as identity as well as social experience, it was, instead, insufficient to promote narratives. In this sense, one of the main result of the exploratory study was the suggestion to try to find “new ways”, “new instruments” able to facilitate the production of personal narrative and of narrative meaning-making.

Through these aspects, the exploratory study shed also light on the countless challenges to carry on research with asylum seekers promoting a reflection on the way in which anyone works with this population approaches the clinical practice and the research too. Working with this population, in fact, always implies a particular mind-set. On the one hand, in working with asylum seekers and refugees both researchers and clinicians are increasingly called upon to familiarise themselves with inhuman experiences, literally *incubating* these experiences before the asylum seekers themselves (De Micco, 2017). On the other hand, the extreme complexity of the refugee experience seems to put clinicians and researchers in a situation of suspension, very similar to the one experienced by asylum seekers, in which they are waiting for or searching for new methods that could help to understand something more (Tessitore & Margherita, 2017). Exactly in the attempt to “find” or “create” new ways and instruments to approach the research and the intervention with this population, the research-project was re-defined in its aims and methodology.

**Chapter 4**  
THE ASYLUM SEEKERS IMAGES-MEDIATED NARRATIVE  
INTERVIEW:  
PROPOSAL FOR A NEW METHODOLOGY TO EXPLORE THE  
ASYLUM SEEKERS' EXPERIENCES

*Overview*

As shown in the previous chapter, the first study shed light on strong and weak points of the methodological approach used in exploring the asylum seekers' experiences, helping to identify the main issue following the research project.

The following chapter presents the re-definitions of research questions and aims of the PhD work and shows the second study that was carried out. The study was aimed specifically at the development of a new images-mediated narrative interview. The chapter explains the research steps carried out for the development of the new instrument and offers some reflection about the implications that the new instrument has for research as well as for clinical practice.

#### 4.1. Introduction

The exploratory study has contributed to identify the main features of the present research-project. Therefore, considering the results of the exploratory study, the whole research-project was redefined in its aims and procedures.

First of all, as mentioned above, the exploratory study shed light on the complexity of the asylum seekers experience, suggesting to look at it simultaneously exploring all its temporal phases: the pre-migratory, migratory and post-migratory ones.

This aspect was very vital in order to undertake a holistic analysis without prejudice or pre-assumptions, and without limiting the focus on the so-called “refugee trauma”. Focusing only on the “refugee trauma”, in fact, would be limiting as this reflects a single phase of concrete traumatic events, which is also the more explored issue by the international psychological researches among this population (Papadopoulos, 2002).

Through the cluster representation, the exploratory study showed very clearly the identity fracture (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1990) produced by the migratory experience. This splitting of the identity cluster (*Memories from the past*) testified how participants seemed able to think about themselves only as “migrants”, giving testimony of the birth of a new identity but, at the same time, showing how their origins and their life before departing represented something that they do not want to recall or cannot recall. The investigation of their experiences overall becomes, therefore, urgent also in the attempt to reconnect this part of their life with their whole lifestory, that is, helping them to re-give unit to their identity. Doing this, in clinical terms, is even more important considering the specificities of asylum seekers who, while waiting for the evaluation of their international protection requests by the Territorial Committee, are in a phase of both social-juridical and identity suspension (Margherita & Tessitore, *under review*).

On the one hand, the exploratory study confirmed the utility of investigating asylum seekers’ experiences through a qualitative research. The qualitative research is, in fact, able to explore in-depth the subjective experiences of asylum seekers.

On the other hand, it showed also the limit of a “pure” narrative method (Bruner, 1990, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988) that seemed inadequate to promote real narratives. The participants’ interviews collected during the exploratory study were, in fact, very brief,

lacking narrative links and of emotional and cognitive dimensions. These limits, as mentioned in the previous chapters, are the results of the traumatic experiences lived by asylum seekers which broke/disrupt the meaning-making processes and make difficult the production of “real” narratives.

In this sense, the exploratory study suggested the need to find or construct more suitable instruments for the exploration of asylum seekers’ experiences that could be more sensitive towards the problematic aspects emerged.

In the attempt to accomplish this goal, gaining from the psychodynamic knowledge the fundamental role played by the iconic register on the psyche, it was thought that images, pictures or photographs could represent a useful supportive tool for the interview.

This idea was based on different assumptions that will be explained in the next paragraph.

#### *4.1.1 The images as “support to the word”*

It was the psychoanalysis that firstly restored the importance of the visual/iconic register for the psyche. Ferruta (2005) looked at the role of the images’ representations as first and fundamental form of representation. Therefore, from a psychoanalytical point of view, the images could be considered as representation in absence of representativeness.

As mentioned in the previous chapters, the iconic register represents the first step of the symbolisation process which has in the production of a coherent narrative, that is, in the process of putting the emotional experiences in words trying to give them sense, its more complex status (Boccaro, 2005).

The image discloses the Self and helps the subject to be in touch with his/her lifestory. Therefore, it acquires an evocative exuberance in the images of films, pictures, photographs which stimulate the subject to recognise something of him/herself which constitutes, and also institutes, his/her essence.

Thinking about the artistic representations, pictures and photographs, above all if they reflect the internal experience of the observer, represent a powerful activator of feelings and memories of inner sensations.

Moreover, thinking about the role that the images have for dreams, the emotional experiences normally find in dreams a first way of expression through the visual

representations. Gradually, starting from the images, the dreamer can put in words the dream tale whose meaning achieves a higher sense in the relationship in which has been narrated.

Finally, as can be observed in graphical and/or projective tests, the images represent a universal language that supports the words even if the language skills have not been achieved yet or, as in the case of asylum seekers, the spoken languages are different.

On a methodological level, a part from the projective and graphic techniques which, even though based on the recognition of the role played by the visual register for the psyche, were essentially developed on the basis of ambiguous or abstract/metaphorical stimuli, very few methods mediated by images/pictures existed in literature.

In the psychoanalytical literature an example of clinical device mediated by images is the photolanguage technique developed by Vacheret (1985). The photolanguage is a technique largely used in France in the educational as well as in the clinical field based on the recognition of the images as objects with a mediator function. The images, as mediator objects, in individual as well as in groups setting, becomes the occasion to mobilise the primary process of thinking, promoting the symbolisation process and, therefore, the connection between the primary and the secondary process. This technique is used in therapeutic or educational group and uses photographs as mediator object to develop/elaborate different topics discussed by the group (Zurlo, 2005; Vacheret, 2002; 1999; Baptiste et al., 1991). The group, therefore, works on different issues using photographs chosen by itself from a dossier offered by the groups conductor.

The whole research-project took inspiration from the above mentioned considerations.

#### *4.1.2 Research questions and Aims*

Starting from these premises, research questions and aims of the whole research-project were re-defined.

In particular, the idea which guided the whole study was that pictures could represent a useful support to the interview and could be able to mediate and so promote the process which proceeds from the memory of the asylum seekers' experiences to their narration.

Not existing in literature an images-mediated interview, the present study was aimed at:

- Developing a new type of narrative interview mediated by images;

Considering the concreteness that normally characterises individuals who have lived devastating experiences, it was thought that pictures needed to concretely capture and reflect experiences as well as physical and cultural characteristics of participants.

Moreover, considering research and clinical practices as relational fields in which narratives are constantly co-constructed by the involved subjects, it was necessary the images would emerge from the encounter between asylum seekers and researcher, rather than imposed by the researcher.

Not existing in literature interviews mediated by images, the development of the new instrument followed different steps that were thought in order to model a new methodological proposal that could be useful and applicable for anyone in future would like to develop a similar instrument. The development of the new instrument was realised mixing different existing methods and data analysis procedures (i.e. focus groups and analysis of frequencies of the focus group contents) and other non-experimental procedure (i.e. the collaboration with a photographer).

The whole procedure involved a total of four steps: a first focus group aimed at collecting the mental images of participants regarding their pre-migratory, migratory and post-migratory experiences; the collaboration with a photographer for choosing the photographs; a second focus group aimed at validating the efficacy of the chosen pictures in describing the asylum seekers' experiences; the development of an account and of specific administering procedures for the new instrument.

All the steps of the present study were approved by the Appointed Committee and carried on in accordance with the World Health Organization ethics guidelines (2011) and with the International Ethical Guidelines for Health-related Research Involving Humans (Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences, 2016).

## 4.2. Step 1: The first focus group

### 4.2.1 Materials and Methods

#### 4.2.1.1 *Setting and Participants*

A total of two group encounters were conducted in two different male Extraordinary Reception Centres located in the Campania Region of Southern Italy.

Participants were selected on the basis of some criteria which reflected the characteristics of most of migrants arrived in Italy (Ministry of Interior; 2017). This choice was made in order to facilitate the collection of the sample for the next phases of the study (see Chapter 5).

Therefore, participants were selected on the basis of the following inclusion criteria:

- Sub-Saharan African origins;
- able to speak English;
- being asylum seekers<sup>7</sup>.

Before proceeding with data collection, the asylum seekers respecting the inclusion criteria were met collectively at each Centre, informed of the aims of the study and asked to express interest in participating. During the first collective meeting, the role of the psychologist/researcher was clearly described and it was clarified that the research had no influence on the asylum granting procedures.

In the first Centre, out of a total of 25 asylum seekers met, 2 declared themselves unavailable to take part in the research, thus a total of 23 asylum seekers took part to the study. In the second Centre, out of total of 30 asylum seekers, 13 declared themselves unavailable to take part in the research, thus a total of 17 took part to the study.

Before starting the group encounter, participants were individually met at each Centre in order to receive and sign a consent form which explained in-depth aims and procedures of the study, guaranteed their voluntary participation and anonymity. Moreover, participants were asked to complete a sociodemographical schedule (Tab. 1).

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<sup>7</sup> Respecting the definition of UNHCR, were considered asylum seekers persons who have sought international protection and whose requests for refugee status have not yet been adjudicated.



*Tab. 1 Characteristics of asylum seekers' participants*

	<b>GROUP 1</b> <i>(n=23)</i>	<b>GROUP 2</b> <i>(n=17)</i>
<b>Nationalities</b>	20 Nigerian 3 Gambian	13 Nigerian 5 Gambian
<b>Mean Age</b>	26.5	27.8
<b>Asylum Status</b>	21 waiting for evaluation 2 waiting for verdict	17 waiting evaluation
<b>In Italy since (mean time)</b>	20 months	18 months

The first group (Group 1) was composed by 20 Nigerian and 3 Gambian asylum seekers (mean age 26.5). 21 participants out of 23 were waiting for evaluation by Territorial Committee, whereas 2 of them have already done the conversion and were waiting for the result.

The second group (Group 2) was composed by 13 Nigerian and 5 Gambian asylum seekers (mean age 27.8). All participants were waiting for evaluation by Territorial Committee.

All participants (Group 1 and Group 2), as all forced migrants arrived in Italy, have reached Italy through the main migratory route of the Central Mediterranean Sea from Libya.

In a second meeting, a group encounter was performed.

A part from asylum seekers, each group was composed by a psychologist/researcher (the author) who conducted the group, an interpreter made available by the Centres, a non-participant observer (a psychologist, author' colleague), one psychologist per group who worked into the Centres and two Italian teachers per centre<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> The psychologists and the Italian teachers showed their interest in taking part to the focus groups in order to increase knowledge about asylum seekers' experiences. Their presence was considered as an added value for the study considering that the research, as the work, with asylum seekers and refugees always implies an encounter between Othernesses who come from different cultural

Thus, Group 1 was composed by a total of 29 participants; Group 2 by a total of 23 participants. Each focus group was conducted in a room made available by the Centres and lasted an average of 3 hours.

#### *4.2.1.2 Design, methodology and procedures*

According to the aim of the first step of the research, a qualitative methodology was used. The collection of the asylum seekers' "images" of their experiences and the exploration of their efficacy in depicting these experiences were made through the focus group methodology (Morgan, 1996, 1993; Kitzinger, 1995; Shamdasani, Stewart, & Rook, 1990). Focus-groups are a form of group interview that capitalises on communication between research participants in order to generate data. Focus groups explicitly use the group interaction as part of the method and are particularly useful for exploring people's knowledge, experiences and points of view.

Due to refusal by the Centres, none of the encounter was audio-recorded; but the presence of the non-participant observer was fundamental in order to take notes of the images and reflections emerged by the groups.

The focus group was organised through an initial presentation of the aims and procedures of the group clarifying the roles played by the non-participant observer, by psychologists and by the teachers. Then, all participants were asked to call themselves with the nickname signed on the sociodemographical schedule in order to guarantee the anonymity and to tell their age and country of origins to the whole group.

The exploration of images, moments and events connected to the pre-migratory, migratory and post-migratory experiences was made into three different times in order to dedicate to each temporal phase (pre-migratory experience, migratory experience and post-migratory experience) sufficient time. The exploration was made through the following account:

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backgrounds. As such, the result of this meeting and the knowledge produced by the meeting is always an "hybrid" between different social and personal representations.

*Now try to close your eyes and try to think about your life before migrating/your journey/your life in Italy and, once ready, tell to the group the first image/moment/event/thing that comes to your mind.*

Then, the discussion about the images produced by participants was opened and free: participants who wanted to talk about their images/event or to comment other images were free to intervene. Who did not want to talk or participate to the discussion was free to remain in silence.

#### *4.2.1.3 Data Analysis*

The notes of the data emerged from the first meeting of the focus groups were made by the non-participant observer and analysed through a content analysis and an analysis of frequencies (Smith, 2000; Rositi, 1988; Krippendorff, 1983). First, each image was categorised on the basis of its object; then a calculation of frequencies was made. Each steps of data analysis were individually made by the author, the observer and the supervisor of the present work and then compared in order to make a crosscheck of the images meanings and frequencies.

#### *4.2.2. Results*

All the images produced by participants were categorised on the basis of their principal objects (i.e., if participants, thinking about their pre-migratory experiences, spoke about their family, the image was categorised as “family”. If participants, thinking about the migratory phase, spoke about the tortures in Libya, the image was categorised as “Libya (torture, prison, violence)”. If participants, thinking about their post-migratory experiences, referred about an episode of racism lived in Italy, the image was categorised as “racism episode”).

Regarding the pre-migratory experiences, in Table 1 are reported all the images emerged by the focus groups with the related frequencies.

*Tab. 1 Images produced by participants regarding the pre-migratory experience*

<b>FOCUS GROUP 1</b>	<b>FOCUS GROUP 2</b>
Father ( <i>n=12</i> )	Nuclear family ( <i>n=10</i> )
Mother ( <i>n=10</i> )	Village or city where I was born ( <i>n=8</i> )
Nuclear family ( <i>n=8</i> )	Father ( <i>n=8</i> )
Sons and/or daughters ( <i>n=4</i> )	Mother ( <i>n=6</i> )
Wife ( <i>n=3</i> )	Sons and daughters ( <i>n=5</i> )
Friends ( <i>n=2</i> )	Crisis (religious, political, social) ( <i>n=5</i> )
Crisis (political, religious, social) ( <i>n=2</i> )	Me at work ( <i>n=3</i> )
Me at school/work ( <i>n=1</i> )	

The discussion about the pre-migratory experiences produced images mainly related to the participants' family. Mother, father and the nuclear family were, in fact, the most common images which came to their minds.

Regarding the migratory experiences, in Table 2 are reported all the images emerged by the focus groups with the related frequencies.

*Tab. 2 Images produced by participants regarding the migratory experiences*

<b>FOCUS GROUP 1</b>	<b>FOCUS GROUP 2</b>
Libya (torture, prison, violence) ( <i>n=15</i> )	Libya (torture, prison, violence) ( <i>n=12</i> )
Cross the desert ( <i>n=10</i> )	Cross the desert ( <i>n=10</i> )
Journey on the boat ( <i>n=10</i> )	Journey on the boat ( <i>n=8</i> )
Rescue boat ( <i>n=8</i> )	Rescue boat ( <i>n=8</i> )
Fear ( <i>n=7</i> )	Death of people ( <i>n=7</i> )
Tragedy ( <i>n=6</i> )	Freedom ( <i>n=5</i> )

As expected, this part of focus groups was emotionally dense due to the extreme events asylum seekers lived during their journey that started from the crossing of the desert, came across the violences lived in Libya and arrived to the journey on the boat in the attempt to reach Italy. As can be seen in Table 2, in this part of the focus group, some participants were able to produce, not only events/moments or images, but also some abstract and or emotional concepts: in fact, through the fear, the feeling of freedom, few of them were also able to

speak about the emotions they lived in that period, not necessarily anchored to a specific event but to a general soul state.

Finally, the third part of the focus group moved towards the participants' images of the post-migratory experiences (Tab. 3).

*Tab. 3 Images produced by participants regarding the post-migratory experiences*

<b>FOCUS GROUP 1</b>	<b>FOCUS GROUP 2</b>
Italian lessons ( <i>n=14</i> )	Racism episode ( <i>n=13</i> )
Racism episode ( <i>n=10</i> )	Italian lessons ( <i>n=10</i> )
Need to work/Work conditions ( <i>n=8</i> )	Too long waiting time for document ( <i>n=8</i> )
Gratitude ( <i>n=4</i> )	Safety ( <i>n=7</i> )
Suffering ( <i>n=3</i> )	Need to work/Work conditions ( <i>n=7</i> )
Protection ( <i>n=2</i> )	Freedom ( <i>n=6</i> )
Hope for a new life ( <i>n=2</i> )	Deficiency of the centre in taking care of me ( <i>n=4</i> )

The last part of the focus groups was mainly characterised by images that described the routine of the centres (italian lessons), the description of episodes of racism and work experienced in Italy. Even in the last part, some participants produced abstract concepts referred to their emotional status: the feeling of freedom and safety as well as the sense of gratitude towards the Italian Government that saved them from the death.

#### 4.3. Step 2: The choice of the pictures

Starting from the images collected through the focus group, it was decided to choose as images some photographs able to concretely reflect the experiences of African asylum seekers hosted in Italy. First of all, due to a general tendency to concreteness emerged also from the focus groups, it was established to choose photograph as more realistic and concrete as possible. The photographs were chosen through the collaboration with a young emergent Neapolitan photographer, Giulio Piscitelli<sup>9</sup>, who worked for some years in Africa and for

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<sup>9</sup> Giulio Piscitelli (b. 1981, Napoli), was awarded a degree in Communication Studies, approached photography in 2008, and after graduation began working with Italian and foreign news

some months on the board of some ONG ships that operate in the Mediterranean Sea for the rescue of forced migrants escaping from Libya.

Through the collaboration with the photographer a total of nine photographs<sup>10</sup> (Appendix A), reflecting the most frequent images emerged by the focus groups, were chosen from the photographer' dossiers.

In particular, two photographs, depicting an African mother with his son and an African father with his son, were chosen for the description of the pre-migratory experiences, mainly referred to the concept of family, mother and father, sons and daughters. Due to the high frequency of very different and emotionally dense images for the migratory experiences, four photographs were chosen for this phase. One photograph depicts the crossing of the desert, one depicts a male body with some wounds that could recall the Libyan violences, one photograph depicts the journey on the boat and, finally, one photograph depicts the moment of the rescue. In conclusion, three photographs were chosen to represent the post-migratory experiences. One depicts the interaction between asylum seekers and an Italian teacher in a Primary Reception Shelter, one depicts the interaction between an African man and an Italian police (in order to recall the relationship with the immigration system) and one depicts an African man working in a farmland with an Italian man.

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agencies. His work is mainly related to current topics and in last years he focused on the immigration crisis in Europe. His reports were published by national and international newspapers and magazines such as: *Internazionale*, *New York Times*, *Espresso*, *Stern*, *Io donna*, *Newsweek*, *Vanity Fair*, *Time*, *La Stampa*, *Vrji* and others. Piscitelli currently lives and works in Naples.

<sup>10</sup> During the second study, the author was conducting the recruitment of the sample for the third study and, even if there was the possibility to recruit also some asylum seeker women for the research, it was decided to choose photographs depicting men because there were not "gender mixed or female focused" photographs into the photographer' dossiers.

#### 4.4. Step 3: The second focus group

##### 4.4.1 Materials and Methods

###### 4.4.1.1 *Setting and participants*

The second and last group encounters were conducted in the same setting and with the same participants of the first one.

The focus group was conducted into the same room of the first encounter and lasted an average of 2 hours.

###### 4.4.1.2 *Methodology and Procedures*

As for the first one, the second group encounter was conducted with the methodology of the focus group (Morgan, 1996, 1993; Kitzinger, 1995; Shamdasani, Stewart, & Rook, 1990). Having the aim to confirm the validity of the photographs in reflecting the asylum seekers' experiences, the focus groups were organised as opened discussions where participants, looking at the pictures positioned in the middle of the group, were asked to look at the photographs and to say how much they thought photographs were able to represent and recall asylum seekers' experiences and faithfully reflect the images that they produced during the first encounter. The group was thought also as a space in which the emotional activation raised up by pictures could have been contained.

##### 4.4.2 Results

All the images, according to the focus group participants, described well the images and the moments that asylum seekers have thought and described during the first focus group respectively for the pre-migratory experiences, migratory experiences and post migratory experiences.

In particular, all asylum seekers' said that both the photographs connected to the pre-migratory experiences depicted a common African family and environment. All participants recognised in the photographs connected to migratory experiences the crossing of the desert, the extreme situations that many forced migrants lived in Libya. Moreover, they recognised the dinghy on which they crossed the Mediterranean Sea and re-lived the emotions depicted in the African boy' eyes when the rescue boat saved them. Finally, the photographs

connected to the post-migratory experiences recalled them the Italian lessons they usually did at the Centres as well as the working conditions lived by many of them in Italy. The picture depicting the interaction between an African boy and a police man recalled them the usual relationship that all of them have to carry on with the immigrants' officials in order to obtain the asylum granting as well as, due to the ambiguous expressions depict on the photograph subjects' faces, some racist episodes that some of them have lived in Italy. Considering participants' feedback, no one photographs was eliminated by the created dossier.

#### 4.5. Step 4: The development of the images-mediated narrative interview' procedures

After having confirmed the ability of the nine photographs to reflect asylum seekers' experiences, the fourth step was devoted to the development of a clear procedure for the administration of the images-mediated narrative interview.

##### 4.5.1 *The account*

To explain the interview procedure and the role that photographs have for asylum seekers' lifestory telling, an opened account taking inspiration by the account of the Rorschach Test<sup>11</sup> (Rorschach, 1921) was developed:

*Now, I am going to show you some pictures...*

*I chose them with the help of other asylum seekers like you. We believed that they could somehow recall different phases of your life...*

*I ask you to look at them and, starting from the one that mostly catch your attention or from whatever you want, to tell me something about you and your experience...*

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<sup>11</sup> The Rorschach Test (Rorschach, 1921) is a projective psychological test in which subjects' perception of inkblots are asked, recorded and analysed using psychological interpretations. The images-mediated narrative interview took from the Rorschach account the beginning and the ending in order to put subjects in a comfortable situation and to clarify that there were no wrong or correct answers.



*There are no right or wrong answers...Feel free to start whenever you want...*

The account of the exploratory study (*Tell me something about you and your experience*) remained unvaried by virtue of its efficacy, testified in the exploratory study, in promoting the asylum seekers' experiences narratives in terms of identity as well as of social experience.

Moreover, the account explains to participants that the photographs have been chosen with the help of other asylum seekers like them. This aspect was thought in the attempt to avoid the possibility that participants feel photographs as something imposed by researcher who is completely stranger to their experiences. Therefore, this point is particularly important in order to develop trust towards the researcher as well as the participant' awareness of "not being alone" in helping the researcher towards the exploration of their life story.

#### *4.5.2 Setting and Procedures*

In the attempt to respect the asylum seeker privacy, the interview should be administered in individual meeting in a room made available by the Centres that freely decide to take part in the study. The interview needs to be conducted into just one meeting in order to avoid interruption of the narrative flow. Moreover, it has to be carried out at the only presence of the participant, the researcher/interviewer and of an interpreter made available by the Centre who would preferably has the same participant' nationality and spoken language. Therefore, the interview' setting remained the same of the exploratory study in which the positive aspects of the individual meetings as well as of the presence of the interpreter were experienced.

The interview should start putting all photographs on a table and letting the participant free to explore pictures before starting and to choose the picture he wants to begin with. This aspect has the aim to let participants free to follow their personal narrative flow in telling their life story.

The interview can be administered differently depending on the purposes.

In research setting, the interviewer has the task to intervene as less as possible, to respect the participant' ability to make or not connections between photographs and between their experiences, to follow the participant' flow of narration about their lifestory as well as to try to take mentally note of what picture is chosen first and/or of what picture is not chosen at all. Moreover, in case participant does not do it, interviewer has the task to explore all the migratory phases using the photographs missed to be pointed out or mentioned (e.g., what about this picture? If you look at this picture?).

The interview ends with the deliver of a white photograph. The interviewer asks the participant to look at the white page thinking to the future and to try to express what he can see/imagine/desire about it. This ending was thought in line with the desire to promote the asylum seekers' possibility to project themselves in the future. In the exploratory study, in fact, asylum seekers showed a sort of limitation in their imaginative capabilities about the future connected to the impact of their past experiences as well as to their social-juridical and identity suspension.

Considering the characteristics of photographs and their role of "powerful activators" of memories, the interview needs of a follow-up meeting in order to monitor the participant' feelings, to receive feedbacks and take care of his reactions and emotional states.

#### 4.6. Discussion

The methodological steps carried out led to the development of a new in-depth narrative interview: The Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview. This new instrument was born with the aim to in-depth explore the asylum seekers' life story deducing from the psychodynamic perspective the fundamental role played by the iconic register on the psyche.

As explicitated by its name, the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview is referred to the asylum seekers experience and, in particular, is destined to Anglophone African male asylum seekers who represent the target of the present work and reflect the principal characteristics of migrants arrived in Italy.

The reference to a specific target of population represents, at the same time, a strong as well as a weak point of the instruments. Its fragility point could be seen into the poor feasibility of the instrument in exploring the experiences of other target population (e.g.

asylum seekers coming from other nationalities, female asylum seekers nor non asylum seekers' participants). However, the strong point of the instrument could be tracked into its cultural-sensitivity. In this sense, the interview consciously reflects the awareness that research as well as clinical practice with asylum seekers and refugees need to take into consideration the specificities of each cultural background, not being just person-centred but also culture-centred.

Furthermore, although the images-mediated narrative interview was developed to explore the experiences of Anglophone African male asylum seekers characterised by specific migratory and post-migratory experiences, the methodological procedure that led to its development can may be replicated in order to develop similar instruments that use pictures as supportive tools to explore experiences of other target population.

The validity of the new instrument in exploring the asylum seekers' life story and in promoting or increasing meaning-making will be explored in the next chapter.

Herein some reflection can be offered regarding the characteristics of the chosen pictures and their impact on the emotional level.

On the one hand, the chosen pictures were very concrete in reflecting the experiences lived by asylum seekers as well as in connecting them to their past/present experiences. This concreteness was consciously chosen after the observation during the exploratory study of the asylum seekers' difficulties in accessing to an abstract or metaphorical level when asked to narrate about themselves. After all, by the same focus groups, when asked to tell the first "image" that came to their mind, participants reported concrete memories or event, demonstrating a difficulty in access to an abstract level of thinking. The choice of concrete pictures, which do not let space to the imagination, but, instead, represent a solid anchoring to the real experience, tried to respect their modality of narrating. At the same time, it was also made in the attempt to establish a common field of relationship between participants, researcher and interpreter in which, even if certain experiences were not lived by all the presents, they can be seen, recognised and understood by everyone. In such terms, the concreteness was chosen as symbol of representativeness: even if some experiences are unthinkable and un-known, the concrete pictures make them visible through a common language.

It is also important to highlight the awareness that the chosen photographs, above all by virtue of their concreteness, could assume the role of a powerful activator of emotions and memories for asylum seekers. This aspect has some important consequences on the ethical aspects of research with traumatised people that need to be constantly thought. The pictures may have very upsetting consequences for asylum seekers, at the moment of the interview as well as subsequently. Taking into consideration this aspect, it becomes fundamental to inscribe the whole procedure of research into a strong ethical procedure in which participants are well informed of the consequences of research, guaranteed the possibility to stop whenever they want as well as to ask for support at the end of the research. Moreover, all these implications suggest the need to inscribe the procedure of the images-mediated narrative interview into a wider procedure in which, gradually, participant, researcher and interpreter can build a secure and trust climate as background of the research.

However, it is important to keep in mind that normally the collection of the personal history is a common practice done by all primary reception centres after the asylum seekers' entering into the primary reception system. The collection of the asylum seekers' personal history is configured as an individual conversation between the asylum seeker and an individual who works in the centre (usually a psychologist, but also counselors, or persons who might have not psychological competences), conducted after few days the asylum seeker entered the centre. The conversation has the aim to pick up some personal information (place of birth, date of birth, information about the nuclear family, etc...), the reasons why the asylum seeker left country, the characteristics of the whole journey, often exploring some extreme traumatic events that maybe the asylum seeker is not ready to speak about and that, if the conversation is guided without psychological competences, could produce disastrous consequences. In this sense, the recall of the asylum seekers' past experiences represents a routine that all asylum seekers have to face with once entered into the primary reception system and that, for its characteristics, seems to be something of very similar to the interview with the Territorial Committee aimed at evaluating their request for international protection. By virtue of a general confusion, very often, the two practices, although different for causes and aims, ends up to become similar for asylum seekers who tend to accommodate them.

Considering these aspects, the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview could also represent a proposal for a new methodology for primary reception centres in the attempt to promote a person-centred approach aimed to increase knowledge about the whole life story of asylum seekers not only focusing on a sterile collection of some personal information and on a single portion of their experience, the most critical one. The whole procedure of the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview could be useful for promoting the inscription of the relationship between asylum seekers and the psychologists<sup>12</sup> who work into the primary reception centres in a trust climate where the whole asylum seekers' history can be known, recognised and hosted.

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<sup>12</sup> It is an author idea that the whole procedure of the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview, as well as all procedures that imply the exploration of painful past or present experiences, included the collection of personal history made by reception centres, should be conducted by a psychologist who, by virtue of specific competences, could be more sensitive and prepared to face with the emotional burden that these procedures could involve.

## CHAPTER 5

### EVALUATION OF THE ASYLUM SEEKERS IMAGES-MEDIATED NARRATIVE INTERVIEW' EFFECTS ON MEANING-MAKING

#### *Overview*

After developing the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview, a study was carried out to evaluate its effects on meaning-making.

The present chapter will show the results of this quali-quantitative study aimed at evaluating the effects of the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview on narrative meaning-making, compared to a non-images-mediated interview.

The first part of the chapter explains in detail the research questions, aims, procedures and the results of the study.

The final part shows a final study aimed at developing a Grid to code the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview. The Grid can be considered as a first attempt to understand what dimensions the new methodology allowed to explore.

## 5.1. Introduction

The present study was realised through the drafting of protocol agreements between the Department of Humanities of the University of Naples Federico II and three Associations in province of Naples and Caserta which manages some male Extraordinary Reception Centres where asylum seekers are hosted while waiting for a verdict on their application for international protection.

### *5.1.1 Research questions and Aims*

The research question that guided the present study was that the developed methodology, by virtue of the role played by images, could be able to explore in-depth the asylum seekers' experiences and to increase narrative meaning-making.

In order to verify the research questions, two identical experimental conditions were randomly created. The experimental group was assessed by the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview; the control group was assessed by a non-images-mediated narrative interview. For both groups risk and protective factors were assessed and used as descriptive variables for the study.

In particular, the study was aimed at:

- assessing risk and protective factors of all participants through an evaluation of traumatic dimensions, post-migratory difficulties and resilience characteristics;
- evaluating the effects of the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview, compared to a non-images-mediated one, on narrative meaning-making processes.

## 5.2. Materials and Method

### *5.2.1 Participants*

Considering the aims of the study, participants were selected on the basis of the following inclusion criteria:

-being male;

-being asylum seekers<sup>13</sup>;

-coming from an Anglophone sub-Saharan African country (Nigeria, Gambia and/or Ghana);

-being able not only to speak, but also to write and read in English;

All the research steps were approved by the Appointed Committee, and carried on in accordance with the World Health Organization ethics guidelines (2011) and with the International Ethical Guidelines for Health-related Research Involving Humans (Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences, 2016).

Before proceeding with the data collection, the asylum seekers respecting the inclusion criteria were met collectively at each Centre, informed of the aims of the study, and asked to express interest in participating. During the first collective meeting, the author explained carefully the research aims and procedures as well as the role assumed by the psychologist/researcher. Participants were also assured that the research had no influence on their asylum granting procedures and asked to freely express any questions or doubts regarding the study. These steps, already used for the exploratory study, were considered the first, fundamental step for the development of a trust and secure climate in which the research could be carried on.

Out of a total of 45 asylum seekers met, 9 declared themselves not available to take part in the study. Therefore, a total of 36 participants took part in the research (Tab. 1). All participants arrived in Italy through the main migratory route of the Central Mediterranean Sea from Libya. According to the purpose of the present study, participants were randomly divided into two groups (Tab. 2).

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<sup>13</sup> Respecting the definition of UNHCR, were considered asylum seekers persons who have sought international protection and whose requests for refugee status have not yet been adjudicated.



Tab. 1 Characteristics of Participants

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**Total of participants (n= 36)**

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**Personal Information**

Age: 27.47 (SD=7.28)  
Gender: Male  
Country of origin: Nigeria  
Number of years of education: 11.7 (SD=3.78)  
Religion: 55.6% Christian; 44.4% Muslim  
Married: 80.6% no; 13.9% yes; 5.6% divorced  
Children: 80.6% no; 19.4% yes  
Working in country of origin: 69.4%  
Studying in country: 16.7%

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**Migratory Information**

Reasons why fled from country<sup>14</sup>

Community/Familiar Threat: 30.6%  
Improvement living condition: 27.8%  
Political persecution: 13.9%  
Terroristic persecution: 11.1%  
Escape from justice: 8.3%  
Religious persecution: 5.6%  
Gender persecution: 2.8%

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**Post-migratory information**

Months in Italy: 16.7% (SD=8.05)  
Evaluation of international protection request: 94.4% no; 5.6% yes  
Work in Italy: 11.1% yes; 69.4% never; 19.4% sometimes

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As shown in Table 1, 36 men asylum seekers with a mean age of 27.47 (SD=7.28) took part in the study. All participants came from Nigeria. 80.6% of participants were not married, and 80.6% had no children.

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<sup>14</sup> The reasons why participants fled from country were categorised as follows:

- community/familiar threat: general episodes of threat or violence in community and/or family;
- improvement of living conditions: lack of suitable living conditions;
- political persecution: persecution connected to the Biafra war for independence;
- terroristic persecution: persecution from the Boko Haram terrorist group;
- escape from justice: attempt to flee from justice' problems;
- religious persecution: persecution from cultist groups;
- gender persecution: homosexuality persecution.

Regarding the reasons that forced to flee, the majority of participants moved for community/familiar threat (30.6%) and for improving their living conditions (27.9%). The rest fled from political persecution (13.9%), terroristic persecution (11.9%), from justice (8.3%) and from religious (5.6%) and gender persecution (2.8%).

Regarding their post-migratory conditions, participants had been in Italy for 16.7 months, 94.4% of participants were still waiting for evaluation of their international requests, while 5.6% had already done the evaluation and were waiting for the response.

For the purpose of the present study, participants were randomly divided into two groups: one experimental group and one control group. The characteristics of participants per each group are shown in Table 2.

Tab. 2 Characteristics of experimental and control groups

Experimental Group	Control group
<b>Tot. Participants (n= 18)</b>	<b>Tot. Participants (n= 18)</b>
<p><b>Personal Information</b></p> <p>Age: 28.33 (SD=7.67)            Gender: Male            Country of origin: Nigeria            Number of years of education: 11.72 (SD=3.57)            Religion: 77.8% Christian; 22.2% Muslim            Married: 72.2% no; 16.7% yes; 11.1% divorced.            Children: 77.8% no; 22.2% yes            Working in country of origin: 77.8% yes; 22.2% no            Studying in country: 88.9% no; 11.1% yes</p>	<p><b>Personal Information</b></p> <p>Age: 26.61 (SD=6.98)            Gender: Male            Country of origin: Nigeria            Number of years of education: 10.61 (SD=4)            Religion: 66.7% Muslim; 33.3% Christian            Married: 88.9% no; 11.1% yes            Children: 83.3% no; 16.7% yes            Working in country of origin: 61.1% yes; 38.9% no            Studying in country: 77.8% no; 22.2% yes</p>
<p><b>Migratory Information</b></p> <p><b>Reasons why fled from country</b>            Community/Familiar Threat: 38.9%            Terroristic persecution: 16.7%            Improvement living condition: 11.1%            Religious persecution: 11.1%            Escape from justice: 8.3%            Gender persecution: 5.6%            Political persecution: -</p>	<p><b>Migratory Information</b></p> <p><b>Reasons why fled from country</b>            Improvement living condition: 44.4%            Political persecution: 27.8%            Community/Familiar Threat: 22.2%            Terroristic persecution: 5.6%            Escape from justice: -            Religious persecution: -            Gender persecution: -</p>
<p><b>Post-migratory information</b></p> <p>Months in Italy: 15.50 (SD=10)            Evaluation of international protection request:            88.9% no; 11.1% yes            Work in Italy: 5.6% yes; 72.2% never; 22.2% sometimes</p>	<p><b>Post-migratory information</b></p> <p>Months in Italy: 18.06 (SD=5.37)            Evaluation of international protection request:            100.0% no            Work in Italy: 16.7% yes; 66.7% never; 16.7% sometimes</p>

Each group was composed of 18 participants (Tab. 2). The experimental group had a mean age of 28.33 (SD=7.67). Only 3 participants out of 18 were married, and 4 out of 18 had children. The reasons why participants fled the country were mainly community/familiar threat (38.9%), terroristic persecution (16.7%), improvement of living condition (11.1%) and religious persecution (11.1%). 16 participants out of 18 were waiting for evaluation of their international protection requests, whereas 2 of them had already done the interview with Territorial Committee and were waiting for response.

The control group had a mean age of 26.61 (SD=6.98). The reasons why participants fled the country were mainly referred to improvement of living conditions (44.4%), political

persecution (27.8%) and community/familiar threat (22.2%). Only 2 participants out of 18 were married, and 3 out of 18 had children. All participants of the control group were waiting for evaluation of their international protection request.

### *5.2.2 Setting and Procedures*

All procedures that characterise the present study were performed in a room made available by the Associations, in the presence of an interpreter of the same origin country of participants who already worked with asylum seekers during the Associations' activities.

After the first collective meeting, a total of four individual meetings with each participant were performed.

In the first meeting, participants signed the consent form to attend the research and completed a form with social-demographic information.

In a second meeting, surveys were administered in order to collect information regarding post-traumatic symptoms levels, post-migratory difficulties and resilient characteristics.

In a third meeting an in-depth interview was administered. The interview differed in the two experimental conditions.

Finally, a fourth conclusive meeting was performed with the aim to return to subjects the sense of the whole research and to monitor their reactions to the interviews.

### *5.2.3 Quantitative Measures*

Participants' traumatic dimensions and post-migratory difficulties were assessed in order to evaluate possible risk factors. Resilient characteristics were also assessed in order to evaluate protective factors. Risk and protective factors were used as descriptive variables of the participants. Moreover, the evaluation of traumatic levels was useful to discriminate potential vulnerable situations and to evaluate the effects of the images-mediated interview also on them. Therefore, the following quantitative measures were chosen:

*The Harvard Trauma Questionnaire-Revised* (HTQ-R) (Mollica et al., 2004, 1992). The HTQ is a self-report questionnaire composed of different parts aimed to assess: trauma events; personal description of trauma events; presence of brain injuries and presence and qualities of post-traumatic symptoms. For the purpose of the present study, only Part IV of

the HTQ-R was administrated. This was aimed to evaluate possible symptomatic conditions. The HTQ-R includes 40 symptoms items. Participants are asked to describe how much some experiences bothered them during the last week on a 4-points Likert Scale from 1 (not at all) to 4 (extremely). The first 16 items were derived from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Third Edition-Revised* (DSM-III-R) and later *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fourth Edition* (DSM-IV) criteria for PTSD using three sub-domains: re-experiencing traumatic events, avoidance and numbing, psychological arousal. The last 24 items included a set of refugee culture-specific symptoms corresponding to the sub-domain self-perception and functioning. The scoring of the PART IV follows two criteria: a total score can be obtained adding items scores and dividing by the total number of the answered items; a DSM-IV score can be obtained adding up the scores of the first 16 items answered and dividing by the total number of the answered items. Individuals with scores on DSM-IV and/or total  $\geq 2.5$  could be considered symptomatic for PTSD.

*The Post-Migration Living Difficulties Scale* (PMLD) (Silove et al., 1997). The PMLD is a self-report checklist aimed to assess the levels of stress due to typical post-migration stressors. It consists of a list of 21 possible post-migration living difficulties. Respondents are asked to indicate the extend to which they were troubled by any of the mentioned living problems, ranging on a 5-points scale from “no problem at all” to “very serious problem”. The checklist was shortened to 12 items for the purpose of the present study with the aim of assessing difficulties in the following areas: communication; discrimination; separation from family; worry about family back at home; being unable to return home in an emergency; not being able to find work; being fearful of being sent back to the country of origin in the future; worries about access to treatment of health problems, loneliness and boredom; isolation; experience of perceived tolerance; thoughts regarding the right or wrong decision to come in Italy. As highlighted by Silove et al. (1997), each item should be treated as a separate incident of stressor.

*The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale* (CD-RISC) (Connor & Davidson, 2003). The CD-RISC is a self-report measure comprising 25 items rated on a 5-points Likert scale from 0 (not at all true) to 4 (true nearly all of the time). The CD-RISC yields a total resilience score ranging from 0 to 100, with higher scores reflecting greater resilience. As highlighted

by Connor & Davidson (2003), factor analysis has demonstrated a five-factor structure: factor 1 relates to personal competence, tenacity, and high standards; factor 2 relates to trust in one's instincts, tolerance of negative affects and resolve in the face of stress; factor 3 relates to acceptance of changes and feelings of security in relationships; factor 4 relates to perceived control; and factor 5 relates to spiritual beliefs. Despite the CD-RISC had not been developed specifically on refugees, it had been used in various cross-cultural studies (Yu et al., 2011; Baek et al., 2010; Karairmak, 2010; Izadinia et al., 2010; Vetter et al., 2010) as well as assessed on refugees (Cetrez, & De Marinis, 2017; Panter-Brick et al., 2017; Ssenyonga, Owens, & Olema, 2013).

#### *5.2.4 Qualitative Measures*

In order to explore the asylum seekers' personal history, in-depth interviews were administered. All the interviews were carried out face-to face by the author in English and were audiorecorded.

As mentioned above, for the purposes of the present study, participants were randomly divided into two groups. The experimental group was assessed by the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview following the administering procedures previously developed (see Chapter 4). The control group was administered by an in-depth interview aimed to explore the same areas explored by the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview: the pre-migratory living phase, the migratory living phase, the post-migratory living phase. Therefore, an opened account as more similar as possible to the account of the images-mediated interview was created:

*We are going to do an interview about your life story. In particular, I will ask you to tell me whatever you remember or want to tell me about different phases of your life: your life in Africa before departing, your journey to reach Italy and your life in Italy. Please, feel free to start from whatever you want. There are no right or wrong answers.*

In order to evaluate the effects of the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview on narratives, it was fundamental avoiding to encourage narrative links. Therefore, regarding the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Interview, if there were any pictures participants did not talk about, the author took a note about it and asked participants

to speak about it through a neutral question (i.e., “and what about this picture...?”). Regarding the non images-mediated interview, participants were asked to tell whatever came to their mind regarding a specific life phase; at the end of the tale (which usually corresponded to a long break), the author asked if participant would like to add other things; in case of a negative response, participants were asked to speak about another phase.

#### 5.2.5 Data Analysis

All quantitative data were analysed through statistical analysis performed with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS Statistics 24.0).

The process of data analysis followed different steps.

A descriptive analysis was first carried out in order to calculate mean values and standard deviation of traumatic levels, post-migratory difficulties and resilient characteristics. Then results in the two groups were compared.

Pearson’s correlations were also computed in order to understand the relationship between traumatic dimensions, post-migratory difficulties and resilient characteristics.

The interviews, audiorecorded and transcribed *verbatim*<sup>15</sup>, were firstly analysed individually by the author, the supervisor of the research-project and her research group. Then, results were compared in order to make a crosscheck of results. Each narrative was firstly assessed on the basis of the words count. Then, all narratives were analysed following the principal indicators of narrative meaning-making (Fivush et al., 2012) including:

*Internal States.* Narratives were coded following the system adopted by Sales, Merrill & Fivush (2013) aimed at identifying internal states and counted each in order to create a total

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to highlight that all the interviews were conducted in English but the spoken English of Nigerian people is the so-called Pidgin English. The Nigerian Pidgin English is an English-based pidgin and creole language spoken as *lingua franca* across Nigeria. The Nigerian Pidgin English is generally comprehensible during speaking sessions but its transcription required a certain familiarity with the language. Therefore, all the interviews were transcribed by three Nigerian interpreters who were asked to respect the grammar construction used by participants (even if it could not seem correct) and to translate only pidgin words that cannot be comprehensible to an english reader.

score for narrative. Internal state language includes mention of emotional contents and cognitive states. According to Sales, Merrill & Fivush (2013), emotional content includes mention of specific emotions or emotional actions (e.g., “love, fear, crying”) as well as affective evaluations (e.g., “I was very scared”) referenced to participant’ internal states. Emotional content was sub-coded by valence as either positive or negative. Cognition words, instead, includes thoughts, beliefs, and desires (e.g., “believe, think, want”).

*Coherence.* Coherence was assessed through the Narrative Coherence Coding Scheme (NaCCS) developed by Reese et al. (2011). This includes three dimensions of coherence: context, chronology and theme. Each dimension is rated on a 4-points Likert scale from 0 to 3; higher scores reflected higher levels of coherence. According to Reese et al. (2011), *Context* indicates the capability of a narrator to orient the information about the time and the place of the story being narrated. *Chronology* assesses the clarity and the order with which the events are narrated. *Theme* represents the extent to which the narrator maintains the focus on a topic connecting it to causal interpretations. In order to reach the highest score in *Theme*, the narrator must have developed the story by providing links to other autobiographical events or to self-concepts. It is important to highlight that, considering that both the interviews used for the study explored asylum seekers’ life story along three main phases: the pre-migratory phase, the migratory phase and the post-migratory phase, each dimension of coherence was first assessed per phase. Then, a total score for each narrative was obtained adding up each score and dividing by the number of dimensions in order to obtain a total mean value.

*Reflective insight.* Reflective insight was assessed as described by McLean and Pratt (2006) on a 4-points Likert scale from 0 to 3. A score of 0 was assigned to narratives in which the speaker expresses no reflection on the personal meaning of the event. A score of 1 was assigned to narratives in which the speaker expresses a concrete lesson learned from the experience. A score of 2 was assigned to narratives in which the narrator expresses a vague sense of meaning, that is, the speaker considers himself changed by the experience but in an unspecific way. A score of 3 was assigned to narratives in which the speaker mentions specific personal changes or growth as a result of the experience, demonstrating a new worldview or self-understanding.



After analysing the interviews, descriptive analysis for all narrative indexes were performed.

Additionally, to evaluate the reliability of the whole narrative coding system, Cronbach's alpha and intercorrelations between all narrative indexes were computed.

The possible significance of narrative indexes' differences between experimental groups vs control group were examined through a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA).

### 5.3. Results

#### 5.3.1 Risk and protective factors

First, descriptive analysis of traumatic levels of participants were calculated (Tab. 3).

Tab. 3 Trumatic levels HTQ-R (means and standard deviation)

Sub-domains	Mean	SD	N
	Re-experiencing traumatic events	2.39	.82
Avoidance and numbing	2.31	.71	36
Psychological Arousal	2.15	.73	36
Self-perception and functioning	2.12	.59	36
<b>Total score</b>	<b>2.19</b>	.56	36
<b>DSM-IV PTSD</b>	<b>2.28</b>	.63	36
<b>DSM-IV PTSD <math>\geq</math> 2.5</b>	<b>2.93</b>	.62	14

As shown in Table 3, considering all participants, both the mean values for the total score and the DSM-IV PTSD score of the HTQ-R (Mollica et al., 2004) did not pass the cut-off value ( $\geq 2.5$ ). Considering each sub-domains in isolation, higher scores were registered only in the sub-domain "re-experiencing traumatic events".

Looking at individual participants, no subjects reported values higher than cut-off for the total score of the HTQ-R, whereas 14 out to 36 participants reported values higher than the cut-off for the DSM-IV score resulting symptomatic for PTSD.

Further, post-migratory difficulties of participants were also explored (Tab. 4).

Tab. 4 Post-migratory difficulties (PMLD) (means and standard deviation)

Items	Mean	SD	N
Communication difficulties	<b>2.78</b>	1.39	36
Discrimination	2.42	1.42	36
Separation from family	<b>2.75</b>	1.61	36
Worry about family back at home	<b>3.39</b>	1.67	36
Being unable to return home in an emergency	<b>2.94</b>	1.82	36
Not being able to find a work	<b>3.39</b>	1.42	36
Being fearful of being sent back to your country of origin in the future	<b>3.61</b>	1.62	36
Worries about not getting access to treatment of health problems	<b>3.22</b>	1.66	36
Loneliness and boredom	<b>2.71</b>	1.60	36
Isolation	2.47	1.48	36

Items	A lot		Some		A little		F
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Do people in Italy display tolerance towards people of other races, cultures and countries?	8	22.2%	16	44.4%	12	33.3%	12
	Yes		No		Not sure		N
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Do you think your decision to come in Italy was the right one?	29	80.6%	2	5.6%	5	13.9%	5

In line with Silove et al. (1997), each item of the PMLD was considered as separated. As shown in Table 4, participants reported higher levels of difficulty in many areas. In particular, high difficulties levels emerged in relation to “worry about family at home”, “not being able to find a work”, “being fearful of being sent back to their country of origin” and “worries about not getting access to treatment of health problems”.

44.4% of participants reported uncertainties regarding the degree of perceived tolerance displayed by Italians towards people of other races, cultures and countries. Nevertheless, the

majority of participants thought that the decision to come in Italy was the right one.

Additionally, mean values and standard deviation of resilience characteristics of participants were calculated (Tab. 5).

*Tab. 5 Resilient characteristics (CD-RISC) (means and standard deviation)*

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>
Factor 1 – Personal competence	23.36	7.20	36	6	32
Factor 2 – Tolerance of negative effects	14.56	5.32	36	2	26
Factor 3 – Positive acceptance of changes	11.61	4.39	36	1	20
Factor 4 – Perceived Control	7.44	3.11	36	0	12
Factor 5 – Spiritual influence	6.33	1.77	36	1	8
<b>Resilience total score</b>	<b>63.31</b>	<b>18.06</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>92</b>

As shown in Table 5, participants presented a mean value of resilience of 63.31, demonstrating moderately high values of resilience considering the score range 0-100.

Higher values were reported in Factor 1 that is referred to the self-perception of personal competence as well as in Factor 2 that is referred to the tolerance of the negative effects of events.

Trumatic levels, post-migratory difficulties and resilient characteristics were also analysed separately in each group in order to explore the possible differences produced by the randomization (Tab. 6).

Tab. 6 Traumatic levels, resilient characteristics and post-migratory difficulties in Experimental and Control groups (means and standard deviation)

	<i>Experimental Group (n=18)</i>		<i>Control group (n=18)</i>	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<b>HTQ-R</b>				
Re-experiencing traumatic events	2.31	.93	2.45	.71
Avoidance and numbing	2.27	.63	2.34	.80
Psychological Arousal	1.88	.64	2.41	.71
Self perception and functioning	1.98	.50	2.26	.65
Total score	2.06	.48	2.31	.62
DSM-IV PTSD $\leq 2.5$	<b>1.95</b> (n=12)	.35	<b>1.76</b> (n=10)	.41
DSM-IV PTSD $\geq 2.5$	<b>2.99</b> (n=6)	.43	<b>2.87</b> (n=8)	.23
<b>PMLD</b>				
Communication difficulties	2.72	1.63	2.83	1.15
Discrimination	1.94	1.21	2.89	1.49
Separation from family	2.56	1.72	2.94	1.51
Worry about family back at home	<b>3.39</b>	1.78	<b>3.39</b>	1.61
Being unable to return home in an emergency	<b>3.56</b>	1.68	<b>2.33</b>	1.78
Not being able to find a work	<b>3.50</b>	1.58	<b>3.28</b>	1.27
Being fearful of being sent back to your country of origin in the future	<b>3.83</b>	1.54	<b>3.39</b>	1.72
Loneliness and boredom	<b>2.41</b>	1.52	<b>3.00</b>	1.68
Isolation	2.44	1.50	2.50	1.50
<b>CD RISC</b>				
Factor 1-Personal Competence	21.83	9.10	24.89	4.36
Factor 2-Tolerance of negative effects	14.83	6.49	14.28	4.01
Factor 3-Acceptance of changes	12.06	4.55	11.17	4.30

Factor 4-Control	6.61	3.50	8.28	2.49
Factor 5-Spiritual influence	6.00	2.11	6.67	1.32
Total score	<b>61.33</b>	23.08	<b>65.28</b>	11.42

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As shown in Table 6, regarding traumatic dimensions, both groups overall resulted non-symptomatic to PTSD.

Looking at individual participants, in the experimental group 6 asylum seekers out 18 passed the cut-off value for the DSM-IV score, compared to 8 asylum seekers out to 18 in the control group.

Both groups reported the same post-migratory difficulties except for “being unable to return at home in case of emergency” in which the experimental group referred greater difficulties and “loneliness and boredom” in which the control group reported higher values.

Total scores of resilience were moderately high for both groups.

Overall, the experimental and control groups did not present large differences in terms of traumatic levels, post-migratory difficulties and resilient characteristics.

Additional explorative analyses were conducted in the attempt to understand if resilient or traumatic dimensions might have related with some socio-demographical information (i.e., married yes/no; children yes/no; reason why fled from country; mean time of arrival in Italy etc...). No associations emerged from the analysis probably due to the small sample sizes and the fact that the group of participants was highly homogeneous and very few differences emerged between individual personal characteristics.

In order to explore the relationship between traumatic dimensions, post-migratory difficulties and resilient levels, Pearson’s correlation were firstly calculated considering the total group of participants (Tab.7). Then, a deeper exploration was made specifically comparing the group of individuals with DSM-IV scores  $\geq 2.5$  with the group with DSM-IV scores  $\leq 2.5$  (Tab. 8).

Tab. 7 Pearson's correlations risk and protective factors

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
<b>CD-RISC</b>													
1.SCORE RESILIENZA	-												
<b>HTQ-R</b>													
2.Total score	-.029	-											
3.DSM-IV PTSD	.049	.904**	-										
<b>PMLD</b>													
4.Communication difficulties	-.006	.452**	.422*	-									
5.Discrimination	.104	.530**	.456**	.221	-								
6.Separation from your family	.287	.411*	.293	.369*	.396*	-							
7.Worry about family back at home	.064	.501**	.368*	.343*	.373*	.650**	-						
8.Being unable to return home in an emergency	-.227	.336*	.272	.299	-.068	.327	.587**	-					
9.Not being able to find work	.011	.290	.007	.102	.229	.469**	.510**	.385*	-				
10.Being fearful of being sent back to your country of origin in the future	.151	.175	.152	-.027	.208	.278	.266	.485**	.439**	-			
11.Worries about not getting access to treatment to health problems	-.057	.355*	.190	.034	.420*	.471**	.389*	.203	.642**	.425**	-		
12.Loneliness and boredom	.211	.484**	.378*	.163	.549**	.415*	.497**	.313	.474**	.526**	.597**	-	
13.Isolation	.160	.431**	.405*	.025	.554**	.314	.498**	.179	.222	.386*	.328	.753**	-

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$

As shown in Tab. 7, resilient levels did not correlate with traumatic levels and post-migratory difficulties.

However, the total score of the HTQ-R (Mollica et al, 2004; Mollica et al., 1992) was positively correlated with many post-migratory difficulties including, “communications difficulties”, “discrimination”, “worry about family back at home”, “being fearful of being sent back to his country of origin”, “worries about not getting access to treatment of health problems”, “loneliness and boredom” and “isolation”. Coherently, also the post-traumatic symptoms connected to the DSM-IV criteria emerged as positively correlated with different post-migratory difficulties: “communication difficulties”, “perceived discrimination”, “worry about family back at home”, “loneliness and boredom” and “isolation”.

As mentioned above, a deeper analysis was also conducted comparing the group of participants with DSM-IV score  $\geq 2.5$  and the group of participants with DSM-IV score  $\leq 2.5$  in the attempt to explore possible relations between more or fewer vulnerable conditions, post-migratory difficulties and resilience levels (Tab. 8)

Tab. 8 Pearson's correlations between risk and protective factors (above the diagonal= group cut-off values  $\geq 2.5$ ; below the diagonal= group cut-off values  $\leq 2.5$ )

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
<b>CD-RISC</b>												
1.SCORE RESILIENZA	-	.383	.461	.405	.411	.541*	-.212	.412	.279	.244	.708**	.583*
<b>HTQ-R</b>												
2.DSM-IV PTSD	-.126	-	.549*	.063	.803**	.490	.144	.486	.153	.472	.402	.000
<b>PMLD</b>												
3.Communication difficulties	-.252	.400	-	-.007	.405	.208	.053	-.018	-.165	.102	.232	-.017
4.Discrimination	-.048	.383	.234	-	.275	.090	-.695**	.125	-.109	.125	.420	.595*
5.Separation from your family	.214	.171	.334	.457*	-	.647*	.059	.666**	.201	.704**	.570*	.261
6.Worry about family back at home	-.176	.256	.359	.425*	.653**	-	.388	.694**	.600*	.775**	.698**	.463
7.Being unable to return home in an emergency	-.244	.388	.401	.162	.473*	.677**	-	.226	.594*	.351	.049	-.374
8.Not being able to find work	-.205	-.011	.207	.374	.368	.474*	.503*	-	.421	.878**	.502	.086
9.Being fearful of being sent back to your country of origin in the future	.086	.290	.037	.374	.322	.109	.430*	.455*	-	.466	.594*	.271
10.Worries about not getting access to treatment to health problems	-.259	.021	-.044	.600**	.294	.136	.088	.506*	.405	-	.545	.077
11.Loneliness and boredom	-.039	.053	.038	.510*	.352	.350	.441*	.610**	.559**	.668**	-	.598*
12.Isolation	-.105	.220	-.101	.411	.337	.459*	.485*	.430*	.511*	.509*	.791**	-

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01



As shown in Table 8, for both groups no correlations emerged between traumatic levels and resilient characteristics.

In individuals with DSM-IV score  $\geq 2.5$  (above the diagonal), positive correlations emerged between resilience and some post-migratory difficulties: “worry about family back at home”, “loneliness and boredom”, “isolation”. PTSD score emerged as positively correlated with “communication difficulties” and “separation from family”.

Considering individuals with DSM-IV  $\leq 2.5$  (below the diagonal), no correlations emerged between the variables considered.

### *5.3.2 Narrative variables*

Some representative narratives and the way in which they were analysed will be illustrated at the end of the work (Appendix B). On each narrative the words in bold indicate the internal states language (emotions and/or cognitions). At the bottom of each narrative the scores on each coherence dimension (per phase) and reflective insights will be provided. As mentioned above, it is important to keep in mind that the coherence dimensions (context, chronology and theme) were first analysed per phase (pre-migratory, migratory and post-migratory). Then, a total score was obtained adding up the score of each singular phase and dividing by the number of the phase.

Intercorrelations among narrative variables and the Chronbach’s alpha were calculated in order to verify the reliability of the whole coding system (Tab. 9).

Tab. 9 Intercorrelations among narrative variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1.Positive Emotion/Affect	-							
2.Negative Emotion/Affect	.314	-						
3.Cognition	.453**	.657**	-					
4.Coherence Context	.112	-.073	.255	-				
5.Coherence Chronology	.166	.401*	.473**	.412*	-			
6.Coherence Theme	.479**	.516**	.688**	.503**	.420*	-		
7.Reflex	.241	.268	.529**	.175	-.010	.447**	-	
8.Word Count	.295	.640**	.740**	-.050	.326	.490**	.168	-

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$

As shown in Table 9, many positive significant correlations resulted from the analysis.

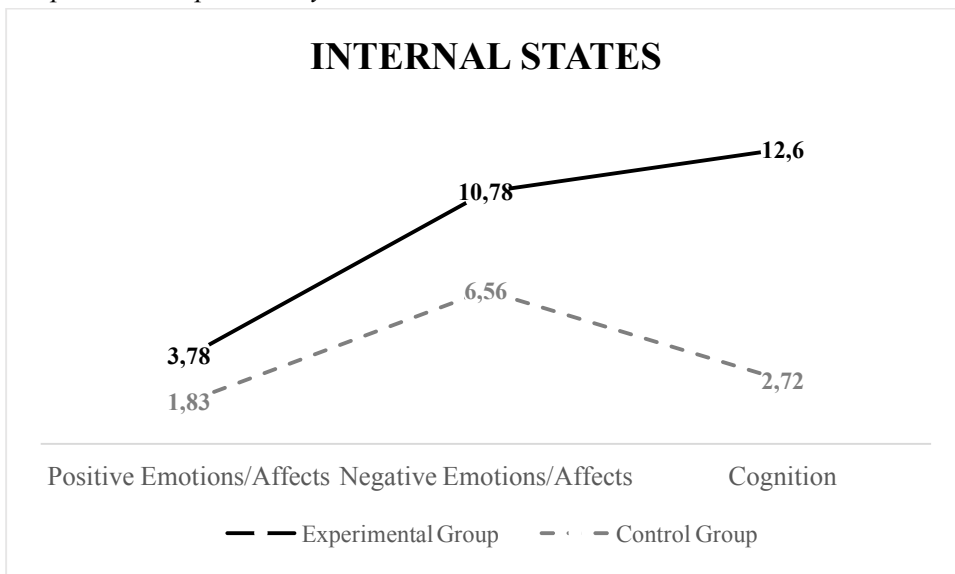
Among emotion variables, *Negative emotions* and *Cognition words*, more than *Positive emotions*, were highly correlated with most of the narrative variables.

Regarding the dimensions of coherence, all dimensions were correlated with each other and, not surprisingly, the *Theme* dimension was highly correlated with the majority of the narrative indexes.

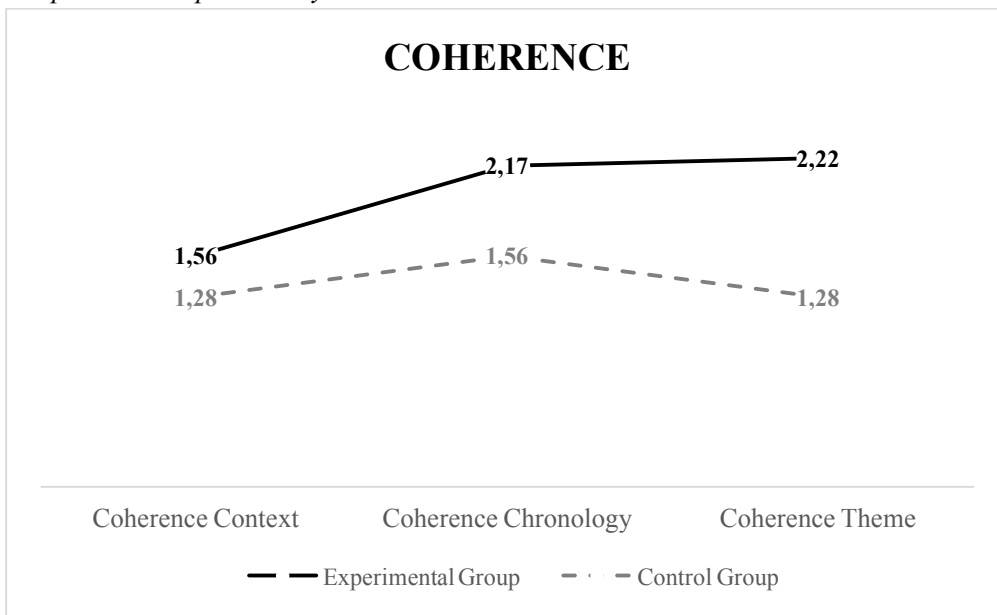
The Cronbach's alpha achieved for this study was .82, demonstrating a good reliability of the whole coding system.

A descriptive analysis was performed in the attempt to explore differences of narrative indexes between groups (Graph 1, Graph 2, Graph 3). The results obtained regarding narrative meaning-making dimensions will be showed graphically to allow an easier reading.

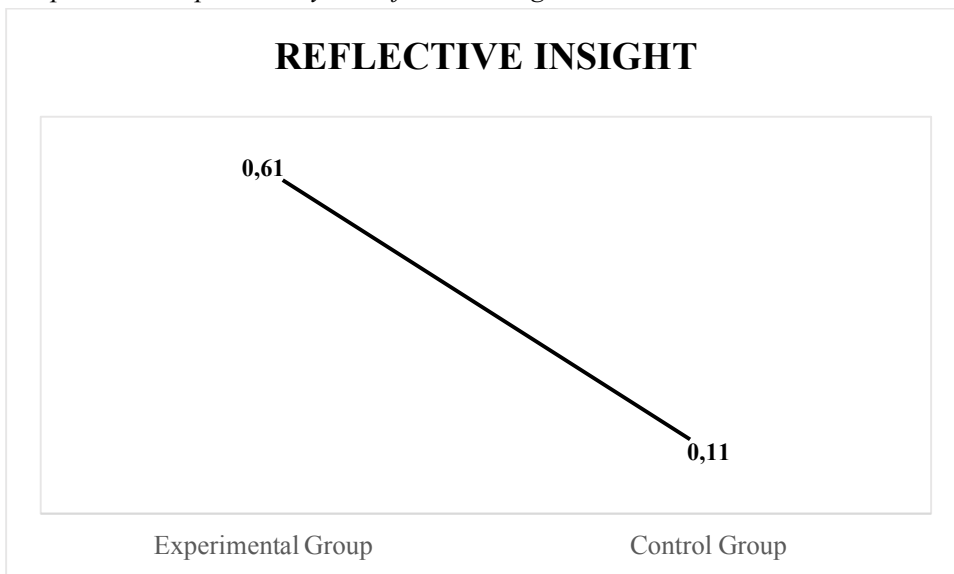
Graph 1. Descriptive analysis Internal States



Graph. 2 Descriptive analysis Coherence



Graph. 3 Descriptive analysis Reflective Insight



As shown in Graph. 1, 2 and 3, many differences emerged between experimental and control groups on narrative meaning-making indexes.

The possible significance of the differences emerged was explored through a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA).

In particular, considering that each group is composed by subjects that obtained a DSM-IV score  $\geq 2.5$  and subjects that obtained a DSM-IV score  $\leq 2.5$ , a MANOVA 2 (experimental group vs control group) x 2 (“clinical sub-group” vs “non-clinical sub-group”) on narrative indexes was carried out (Tab. 10, 11). This analysis was chosen in the attempt to examine the effect of the group factor (experimental vs control group) as well as of the sub-groups factor (DSM scores  $\geq 2.5$  vs DSM scores  $\leq 2.5$ ) on narrative indexes.

Tab. 10 Multivariate analysis

Effect	F	df	p.	$\eta^2$ partial	Wilks' Lamba
Group (Experimental/Control)	5.902	(8,25)	.000	.654	.346
Sub-groups (values $\geq$ 2.5/values $\leq$ 2.5)	1.126	(8,25)	.380	.265	.735
Group*Sub-groups	.603	(8,25)	.162	.013	.975

As shown in Table 10, the group factor was statistically significant [ $F(8,25)=5.902$ ,  $p=.000$ ,  $\eta^2$  partial=.65], whereas the Sub-groups factor was not statistically significant [ $F(1.126)=8.25$ ,  $p=.380$ ,  $\eta^2$  partial=.265] as was the interaction between group and sub-groups [ $F(0.603)=8.25$ ,  $p=.162$ ,  $\eta^2$  partial=.013]. Results clearly showed that the variable experimental vs control group was the only source of significative differences on narrative indexes.

Considering that only the group factor had a significative effect, Table 11 shows the significative differences emerged between experimental and control group on narrative dimensions considering all observed values of F and the relative significance, with the respective means and standard deviation.

Tab. 10 MANOVA (experimental vs control group)

Narrative indexes	M	DS	df	F	p.	$\eta^2$ partial
Positive Emotion/Affect	M <sub>Ex</sub> 3.78	M <sub>Ex</sub> 2.34	(1,32)	4.137	<b>.050</b>	.114
	M <sub>C</sub> 1.83	M <sub>C</sub> 1.76				
Negative Emotion/Affect	M <sub>Ex</sub> 10.78	M <sub>Ex</sub> 3.86	(1,34)	9.174	<b>.005</b>	.223
	M <sub>C</sub> 6.56	M <sub>C</sub> 3.57				
Cognition	M <sub>Ex</sub> 12.06	M <sub>Ex</sub> 4.91	(1,34)	39.429	<b>.000</b>	.552
	M <sub>C</sub> 2.72	M <sub>C</sub> 2.51				
Coherence Context	M <sub>Ex</sub> 1.56	M <sub>Ex</sub> .51	(1,34)	.627	.434	.019
	M <sub>C</sub> 1.28	M <sub>C</sub> .58				
Coherence Chronology	M <sub>Ex</sub> 2.17	M <sub>Ex</sub> .51	(1,34)	6.785	<b>.014</b>	.175
	M <sub>C</sub> 1.56	M <sub>C</sub> .87				
Coherence Theme	M <sub>Ex</sub> 2.22	M <sub>Ex</sub> .55	(1,34)	20.569	<b>.000</b>	.391
	M <sub>C</sub> 1.28	M <sub>C</sub> .46				
Reflective insight	M <sub>Ex</sub> .61	M <sub>Ex</sub> .92	(1,34)	1.060	.311	.032
	M <sub>C</sub> .11	M <sub>C</sub> .47				
Word Count	M <sub>Ex</sub> 1697.67	M <sub>Ex</sub> 665.05	(1,34)	27.806	<b>.000</b>	.465
	M <sub>C</sub> 797.44	M <sub>C</sub> 390.76				

As shown in Table 10, *Word count*, *Internal states* and the coherence dimensions of *Chronology* and *Theme*, were significantly higher in the experimental group compared to the control one.

The results showed that the experimental group assessed by the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview achieved higher values in all narrative meaning-making dimensions except in the coherence dimension of *Context* and in *Reflective insight* dimension that resulted non significant.

#### 5.4. Discussion

The present study was mainly aimed at exploring the effects of the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview on narratives meaning-making dimensions and to compare these effects to a non-images mediated narrative interview.

For the purpose of the study, two equal experimental conditions were randomly created

and participants' risk and protective factors were also calculated and used as descriptive variables for the study.

Before discussing the results, it is useful to clarify some aspects regarding the choice of the quantitative instruments.

For the purpose of the present study, only the fourth part of the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire Revised (Mollica et al., 2004, 1992) was used. The first part of the instrument aimed at evaluating the type of traumatic events lived by refugees, raised up some concerns regarding the possible negative consequences on participants derived from reading, recognising and checking a list of devastating events that they could have or not lived. To avoid this potential issue, the first part of the instrument was consciously excluded and only the fourth part was used in order to explore traumatic dimensions and eventually discriminate between subjects who could be considered symptomatic or not for PTSD, according to the DSM-IV criteria. This distinction could have been useful in order to understand the effect of the images-mediated narrative interview on particularly vulnerable subjects. These considerations, of course, promote a wider reflection about the need for researchers/clinicians to make a thoughtful choice of the instruments taking into consideration their ethical and cultural appropriateness' aspects as well as the way in which they would be used (Patel, Kellezi, & Williams, 2014).

The analysis of risk and protective factors of participants showed interesting results.

Confirming the results of the exploratory study, moderately high levels of resilience emerged in all participants. This result, in line with Simich & Andermann (2014), confirmed that asylum seekers are generally able to cope and adapt to an enormous range of obstacles and challenges. For instance, asylum seekers arrived in Italy represent a population who chose to "resist", to leave Libya even if facing the death on the Mediterranean Sea.

Moreover, despite the enormous range of devastating events lived by participants, the low presence of subjects potentially symptomatic to PTSD confirmed the need to avoid making a direct causal link between the impact of the devastating events lived by asylum seekers and the development of post-traumatic syndromes. These results suggested the need to adopt a complex approach to trauma considering that the impact of devastating events on individuals goes well beyond the construct of PTSD (Bäärnhielm et al., 2017).

Moreover, the relations between risk and protective factors showed that, although a general inverse relation exists, there were no significant associations between traumatic levels and resilience characteristics.

However, significant positive associations emerged between traumatic dimensions and most of the post-migratory difficulties. This result, in line with a series of studies (Beiser & Hou, 2017; Labys, Dreyer, & Burns, 2017; Li, Liddell, & Nickerson, 2016), suggested the importance to take in consideration the quality of post-migratory determinants which generally play a fundamental role in terms of risk as well as protective factors.

Further, a deeper analysis was also carried out in order to explore the relations between risk and protective factors comparing the groups resulted symptomatic for post-traumatic syndromes with the group resulted not symptomatic. The results showed that resilient levels were positively associated to three specific post-migratory difficulties: worry about family back at home, loneliness and boredom, isolation. These difficulties, more than others symbolically connected to the deeper aspects involved by the experiences of “uproot” and “take root”, seemed to activate in particularly vulnerable subjects greater adaptive functioning.

The results showed significant differences between the experimental and control group on most of narrative meaning-making dimensions. Moreover, these differences were not related to the vulnerability of participants towards post-traumatic syndromes, demonstrating that the potentiality of the images-mediated interview in promoting meaning-making independently from the seriousness of traumatic dimensions.

Results suggested the validity of the images-mediated narrative interview in exploring the asylum seekers’ experiences, confirming the capability of pictures/images in constituting a useful “support to the word”.

First, regarding the *word count* dimension, the results suggested that the images-mediated narrative interview promoted a higher production of words.

Second, higher scores in *Internal states*’ language demonstrated that the images-mediated interview increased the possibility to put in words emotions, either positive or negative, and to promote a think about experiences.

Regarding coherence dimensions, both *Chronology* and *Theme* scores were higher in



asylum seekers administered by the images-mediated narrative interview, compared to the control group.

In particular, the *Chronology* dimension gave useful information about the possibility for pictures to allow subjects to temporally connect life story events.

Additionally, differences obtained in the *Theme* dimension, which could be considered as the higher dimension of coherence, suggested that the images-mediated narrative interview allowed an easier focus on topic and an easier connection with other autobiographical events and self-concepts. This dimension together with the higher production of word, showed that the new methodology not only promote life story telling, but that the life story produced by asylum seekers could be effectively considered as a “narrative”, being characterised by the different dimensions that usually confer to narrative its statute.

Although higher scores emerged on the *Reflective insight* dimension in the experimental group compared to the control group, these differences were not significant. However, it is important to highlight that the present study adopted a specific definition of reflective insight, the one developed by McLean and Pratt (2006), even though there is a lively debate in literature on reflective processes and on the necessity to consider them through different levels of complexity (Esposito & Freda, 2015).

Finally, only the coherence dimension of *Context* did not present significative differences between groups.

On the one hand, this results could have been explained considering that subjects produced autobiographical narratives in which the description of specific events situated in a precise time and space, as requested by the coding system to obtaine high scores of *Context*, was not so frequent. Autobiographical narratives produced by asylum seekers, in fact, were more referred to general life events whose absence of specific time and space dimensions did not influence the rest of coherence dimensions.

On the other hand, in order to deeply understand why significative differences did not emerge in the *Context* dimension, further explorative analyses that are not reported in the results section were conducted.

In particular, mean levels and standard deviation of each coherence dimension calculated

per phase (pre-migratory, migratory and post-migratory) were confronted between groups.

Results showed that very few differences between groups emerged on all coherence dimensions (*Context*, *Chronology* and *Theme*) in the pre-migratory phase. Significant differences in *Chronology* and *Theme* emerged from the analysis between groups because of high differences in scores obtained for migratory and post-migratory phases.

From the author point of view, this further explorative analysis suggested important reflections.

On the one hand, the lower differences between groups referred to all coherence dimensions in the pre-migratory phase, seemed to suggest a lower efficacy of pictures chosen for this phase in promoting meaning-making processes. Probably, the reasons could be tracked in the necessity for subjects to make a higher complex operation of abstraction for those specific pictures compared to others. The pictures chosen as representative for pre-migratory experiences (Appendix A), in fact, could be considered less concrete than others requiring the subject to “bypass” the phase of recognition of events as part of his story and to directly connect the photographs to the “idea” of family.

On the other hand, this result seemed also to suggest a greater difficulty for all participants in giving sense to their pre-migratory experiences, confirming the results obtained also in the exploratory study (see Chapter 3). The pre-migratory phase, the one of the origins and of relationship with Motherland, emerged in both group as something of inaccessible, confirming again the *identity fracture* (Grinberg & Grinber, 1990) produced by migration.

This aspect suggests the need for researchers as well as for clinicians to explore this area, trying to promote a re-connection with the origins in the attempt to help asylum seekers in re-giving unity to the deep aspects of their identity.

The present study is not free from limitations. First of all, the number of participants was not so big resulting in a small sample for the analysis. For further research, it could be interesting try to contact a wider number of participants, trying also to perform more complex analysis. Moreover, in further research it could be interesting to plan follow-up meetings to explore the effects of the new instrument on risk and protective factors. Of course, another limitation was connected to the fact that the study was contemporary aimed

at evaluating the effects of the new instrument on narrative and at evaluating its efficacy. Although, in fact, the efficacy of pictures in reflecting asylum seekers' experiences was confirmed by participants of the second study (see Chapter 4), the efficacy of the whole methodology was somehow explored simultaneously to the evaluation of its effects.

Results suggested the overall validity of the new methodology in exploring the asylum seekers' experiences and its positive effects on narrative meaning-making.

However, what are the specificities of the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview? What are the functions promoted by pictures and what dimensions the new methodology allows us to explore?

In the attempt to answer to these questions, a further qualitative in-depth analysis was carried out on the images-mediated interviews collected during this study.

The in-depth analysis, which has conducted to the development of a proposal for a Grid to code the images-mediated interview, will be explained in the next paragraph.

#### 5.5. Proposal for a Grid to code the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview

The development of a Grid was born from the attempt to offer a sort of "grid for thinking" to researchers and clinicians who, in future, would want to use the Asylum Seekers Images Mediated Narrative Interview. Starting from a psychodynamic perspective, the Grid has the aim to orient researchers and clinicians in understanding what are the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview' specificities, what dimensions it allows to explore and on which different levels these specificities could be noticed.

The Grid was developed through an in-depth qualitative analysis carried out on the images-mediated interviews collected in the study described above. The analysis of the interviews was made first individually by the author, the supervisor of the present research-project and a member of the research group who is an expert in research and clinical intervention with individuals who have experienced traumatic events. Then a cross-check of results was made in the attempt to develop the Grid.

The process of analysis followed different steps: the interviews were read more than once in the attempt to understand the specificities of the images-mediated narrative interview,

compared to a non images-mediated interview. Some notes were taken where researchers identified interesting dimensions somehow promoted by the new instrument. Then, a comparison between the most interesting dimensions noticed and what these dimensions allowed to observe was made.

From the analysis, notes referred to the following dimensions emerged:

- what was the first image that the individuals used to start with;
- the images' order through which the speaker narrated his life story;
- what were the different possible functions assumed by images during the life story narrative;
- if there were some images that the individual spoke about more than once through the text;
- if there were some images omitted through the text and that, consequently, required an intervention of the interviewer (i.e. and what about this...?).

Each dimension could be related to a different aspect that the images-mediated interview allows to explore.

First, the first image chose by the subject and the order of the images through which he continued the narrative could give some useful information about the subjective preeminence of specific memories and the way in which this preeminence could be faced with. For example, from the analysis of the interviews it emerged that most of participants started with the images of the desert and, most of them cronologically, went ahead with the other images connected to the migratory phase speaking about Libya, the time on the boat and the rescue. This data suggested that the majority of participants chose to start from the beginning of their journey which represented the beginning of their most devastating memories. Participants chose to start from those memories that probably more than others “push” their psyche in the difficult and most-times impossible attempt to find a space where could be hosted, recognised and thought. Symbolically, the desert is also the place where there is nothing and nothing can be find and/or met; choosing to begin from the desert symbolically means choosing to begin from their internal psychic space, empty of everything, full of nothing.

Second, the functions assumed by images during the interview gave some useful information about the possible movements from concreteness to higher levels of abstraction.

During the analysis of the interviews emerged that pictures could have been used with different functions. Some participants used them in a descriptive manner, remaining on a concrete level:

*“...mmm...here I see a father with his son, I think...”*

*“...a black man who interacts with police”*

The concrete description of what asylum seekers saw in pictures can or cannot be followed by a consequent recognition or recalling of something similar to their experiences, depending on subjects and pictures.

Some participants, instead, acted toward the image a recognition of their experience without identification. Through a defensive mechanism, they seemed to recognise the association between the images and their experiences but the narrative about them is generic without personal reference as if the subject acted a sort of dissociation from the experience. This was noticed regarding pictures about the migratory phases as much as in pre-migratory ones:

*“These are African pictures...the situation in Africa is not easy. Edo State does not have a lot of terrorism. The only things Edo State has are arm robbers...”*

*“The desert is very hot...without water and other stuffs no one could survive because it is a long way, a highway.”*

Some participants could, finally, integrate this dimension acting a deep process of identification toward the photograph and speaking about their personal experience along with generic informations:

*“Let me start from this picture, the one with so many people on the boat, it reminds me the point of death. We don't know where we were going and where we were coming from, it happened*

*when the water waves were so high that sea had bad whether.”*

Additionally, another fundamental function assumed by images is to allow the asylum seeker to chronologically connect the events. The images, in this case, seemed to act as temporal links. This function, that seemed to be connected to the higher levels in chronology emerged from the previous study, allowed the subject to restore a temporal logical thread between experiences:

*“And then...we arrive to these pictures...oh the journey was so difficult...”*

Finally, one of the most important function played by images seemed to be the possibility to act as inter-subjective links. Some participants, in fact, used photographs with the attempt to “drag” the researcher into the story, to “show” what happened in the past, to “confirm” the nature of the devastating events that, through photographs, could be testified.

The pictures, in fact, seemed to embody, in the *hic et nunc* of the interview, the inner witness that normally is destroyed by traumatic experiences but is so vital for the meaning-giving functioning. At the same time, this embodiment conferred to researcher/clinician the possibility to assume the role of external witness of the devastating experiences lived. This function, fundamental in clinical terms, allowed the possibility to build a space in which the asylum seekers’ experiences could have been confirmed and made visible by photographs, and recognised, hosted and testified by researcher:

*“Look...look at this picture...the situation in Libya is very dangerous...”*

*“Look at this, you can see the African environment...you are a woman, Africa is not easy for women...”*

Moreover, the number of the interviewer’ speeches could give some useful information regarding the more or less active role assumed by the researcher in supporting the individual narrative and, consequently, regarding the degree of intensity raised by pictures on asylum seekers. The analysis revealed that generally asylum seekers tended to merge the narrative per phase (pre-migratory/Africa, migratory/journey, post-migratory/Italy) and to pass from

one event to another using pictures or linking to them in a second moment. The passage from one life' phase to another one, instead, depends on subjects: some of them took a break and autonomously started to explore the other pictures, whereas others completely stopped the narrative showing the need of the interviewer speech.

Furthermore, noting the number and the type of images omitted and/or repeated along the whole narrative could give some useful information to identify possible resistances and tendencies to avoid memories of a specific event as well as possible tendencies to re-experience or ruminate about it, suggesting a possible intrusion of that memory in the psyche.

Interviewer' speeches, number and type of images omitted and/or repeated together could somehow refer about the individual "post-traumatic state", that is, the way in which subject deals with the devastating events he lived in the *hic et nunc* of the interview.

Moreover, they could also give some useful information about the characteristics and the qualities of narratives (i.e. more interviewer' speeches normally produce less fluent narratives; more or fewer images omitted produce more or fewer chronological gaps etc.).

Starting from the dimensions observed, a Grid was developed whose final version is shown at the bottom of the work (Appendix C).

It is useful to explain its specific parts and clarify the way in which researchers and/or clinicians could code it and what information could obtain from it.

Graph. 4 presents the first part of the Grid.

Graph. 4 The Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview Grid-Part A

**THE ASYLUM SEEKERS IMAGES-MEDIATED NARRATIVE INTERVIEW GRID**

**PART A**

**ORDER AND FUNCTIONS OF THE IMAGES**

Pre-migratory Phase=1 Images A-B

Migratory Phase=2 Images C-D-E-F

Post-Migratory Phase=3 Images G-H-I

Phases	Images Order	Images' Function				
		Descriptive	Recognition	Identification	Temporal Link	Intersubjective Link
Break	Interviewer speech					
Break	Interviewer speech					
Break	Interviewer speech					
Break	Interviewer speech					
Break	Interviewer speech					
Break	Interviewer speech					
Break	Interviewer speech					
Break	Interviewer speech					
<b>White</b>	Capability to project in future			Suspension of the capability to project in future		

First, the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview is an in-depth interview which explores asylum seekers' life story through three different life phases: pre-migratory



phase, migratory phase, post-migratory phase. Moreover, each phase is characterised by a different number of images. Therefore, the Grid provides a number and a letter for each phase and images associated to it:

- Pre-migratory phase=1 Images A-B\*
- Migratory phase=2 Images C-D-E-F\*
- Post-Migratory Phase=3 Images G-H-H\*

The white page that the researcher proposes at the end of the interview is named “White” and does not follow the same coding system developed for the others.

In the columns named *Phase* and *Images Order* the researcher/clinician should write down the order followed by the subject in narrating his life story (i.e. if the subject start with the images of the desert, the code will be Phase: 2, Images Order: C).

Along the columns, the researcher/clinician should write down also the way in which the subject pass from one image to another. Generally, the passage from one picture to another is automatic into the same phase, whereas in the passage between one phase to another, as above explained, it could happen that the subject takes a break and autonomously passes to the next (in this case an “X” on “break” should be put) or that the interviewer needs to intervene asking to look at the other pictures (in this case an “X” on “interviewer speech” should be out). The breaks and the interviewers’ speeches might also not occur.

In the columns named *Images’ Functions* the researcher/clinician should take a note of the way in which the subject uses the images. The image could be used simultaneously in different ways (i.e. the subject can start describing the images and then narrating what generally happens in the desert. Moreover, he could also integrate the general remembrance with his personal experience narrating what himself lived in the desert and also using the image to create an intersubjective link with the researcher/clinician). It is clear that the images the individual starts with, being the first, cannot be used as temporal link.

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\* A: mother and her son; B: father and his son; C: migrants through the desert; D: man tortured; E: migrants on the boat; F: migrants rescued; G: migrants learning Italian; H: migrant working in a farm; I: migrant interacts with police.

Finally, the last row reports the way in which the subject relates with the white page through which the researcher asks about the future. The individual can show a general capability to project himself in future or, on the contrary, show a suspension of this capability.

The Part A of the Grid could have some useful implications for research as well as for clinical practice.

The capability of the asylum seekers to use the images in order to mediate the relationship with the researcher/clinician represents one of the most important information regarding the effective possibility to develop and programme clinical interventions that, through a holding space and across time, can help to put the basis for the reconstruction of the social links disrupted by the massive trauma.

Moreover, by understanding what are the events that “push to the memory” of the asylum seekers and the way in which they relate with them, it could be possible to understand what areas could be more or less treatable/thinkable in a clinical intervention. This is about understanding the subjective manner of each asylum seeker in processing different phase of his life and about understanding the “right way and time” to work on it through a person-centred approach.

Graph. 5 presents the Part B of the Grid.

Graph. 5 The Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview-Part B

**PART B**  
**MEANING-GIVING FUNCTIONING**

*Information about the post-traumatic State*

Total number of interviewer' speeches: \_\_\_\_\_ Phase: \_\_\_\_\_

Total number of pictures omitted: \_\_\_\_\_

Phase in which pictures have been omitted: \_\_\_\_\_

Type of images omitted: \_\_\_\_\_

Total number of images repeated: \_\_\_\_\_

Phase and type of images repeated: \_\_\_\_\_

*Narratives' Characteristics*

<b>Pre-migratory phase</b>	Chronology: coherent + _____   _____ - incoherent Predominant Emotional Tone: positive + _____   _____ - negative General quality of narrative: fluent + _____   _____ - fragmented
<b>Migratory phase</b>	Chronology: coherent + _____   _____ - incoherent Predominant Emotional Tone: positive + _____   _____ - negative General quality of narrative: fluent + _____   _____ - fragmented
<b>Post-migratory phase</b>	Chronology: coherent + _____   _____ - incoherent Predominant Emotional Tone: positive + _____   _____ - negative General quality of narrative: fluent + _____   _____ - fragmented

The Part B of the Grid is divided into two parts whose coding evaluates the area of

meaning-giving functioning of individuals.

In the first part, named *Information about the post-traumatic state*, the researcher/clinician has to note the total number of interviewer' speeches and the phase in which they occurred, the number and types of images omitted (and, consequently, on which interviewer intervened) and the correspondent phase in which they were omitted, the number and type of images repeated and the phase in which they were repeated.

In the second Table, named *Narrative' Characteristics*, the researcher/clinician can make, a qualitative evaluation of the narratives divided per life phase (as each phase would be a portion of narrative) and analyses each portion on the basis of some narrative dimensions which refer to the narrative meaning-making processes. These dimensions could be evaluated on a sort of 3-points Likert scale. *Chronology*, in line with Adler et al. (2018), refers to the capability of the speaker to give to narrative a chronological flow with identifiable temporal and causal connections. *Predominant Emotional Tone*, refers to the emotional climate that the narrate raised. *General Quality of Narrative*, refers to the quality of narrative that could appear more or fewer fluent or fragmented.

The Part B of the Grid could complement the information obtained by the Part A by giving additional information about the inner meaning-giving functions of the individual.

In particular, it could promote reflections about the post-traumatic state of the subject, that is, about the degree to which the individual needs to be supported during the life story tale as well as his disposition towards the events (through the more or fewer tendencies to perceive some events as intrusive or to avoid them).

It is important to highlight that the Grid represents just a first attempt to code the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview and it could be seen as a proposal in order to systematise even more what dimensions the interview allows to explore. As a rule, as highlighted by Weston et al. (2001), the development of a coding system is strongly related to the evolution of the understanding of a phenomenon. In this sense, the knoweldge about the potentialities of the instrument has to be considered in progress as well as its coding system too.

**CHAPTER 6**  
**GENDER FOCUS:**  
**AN EXPLORATION IN-DEPTH OF THE EXPERIENCES OF**  
**NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKERS' WOMEN**

*Overview*

The sixth and final chapter explains an explorative gender-focused study conducted on a group of asylum seekers women.

The present study was conducted in order to catch the opportunity to understand something more about the experiences of a small group of asylum seekers women who were met during the PhD years.

Due to the fact that the migratory phenomenon in Italy is principally male-oriented and considering the underdevelopment and the fragmentation of researches gender-based on asylum seekers, it was thought that interview asylum seekers women could represent a great and unmissable opportunity. Of course, the following study has to be considered as a first, explorative step in the improvement of knowledge regarding the experiences of asylum seekers women.

The present chapter starts with some premises which clarify some aspects of the present study, following with an overview of psychological researches among female asylum seekers and refugees highlighting trajectories, limits and future perspectives of research. Then, it presents the research aimed at exploring meanings and representations of a small but highly homogeneous group of participants. Considering this homogeneity, a semi-structured interview was developed and analysed through the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 1995) principles.

In conclusion, the chapter discusses results and their implications for research as well as for clinical practice.

### 6.1. Some premises

It is important to highlight that, despite the last trends reported by the Ministry of Interior (2017) highlighted an increasing in number of asylum seekers women, in Italy the forced migratory phenomenon still remain a male-oriented phenomenon. According to the latest data, in fact, in 2017 21.053 asylum seekers women arrived in Italy (in 2016 they were 18.594), compared to 109.066 men (in 2016 men were 105.006) (Ministry of Interior, 2017).

Considering the nature of the phenomenon, the possibility to contact asylum seekers women in Italy should be considered a very highly interesting privilege.

The present research-project have had, in its initial stages, the aim to conduct a gender comparison of asylum seekers' experiences and to evaluate the validity or not of an images-mediated narrative interview in exploring women and men' asylum seekers life story.

Unfortunately, the initial aim reveled its limit in the difficulty to find female asylum seekers reception centers in Southern Italy, to contact them and, above all, once found them, to obtain the women' availability to attend the research.

The study presented in this chapter, as mentioned in the overview, was born from the will to understand something more about asylum seekers' women experience, despite the small number of participants.

Before starting the study, conducted in just one Extraordinary Reception Centers in province of Naples, all the 25 women hosted in the Centre were encountered to explain the aims of the research and to evaluate their availability or not to take part in the research.

Only 5 women accepted to take part in the research, even though great doubts were constantly expressed and discussed with the author during the research steps.

This aspect has to be considered an important datum in informing researchers, clinicians and services that work with asylum seekers' women about the difficulty to contact, not just physically but above all emotionally, this population who may need a particular approach that needs to be thought and improved.

Recalling the doubts expressed by the 5 participants to the study, their difficulty was connected to the expressed suffering in remembering the past as well as to the need to "cover" it as more as possible, instead of remembering and talking about it.

Of course, the women' resistance should be connected to the resistance of any traumatised individuals, especially if victim of the so called men-made disasters (Mucci, 2014), in experiencing the encounter with others as threatening because of fear of re-experiencing and recalling the past experiences (Varvin, 2014). In such terms, without doubts, from a clinical point of view, the need to respect the particular timing of a traumatised person has to be seen as a fundamental aspect to take into consideration and, above all, to respect.

However, herein some brief reflections could be proposed regarding the gender differences emerged by the various experiences lived by the author during the sample' collection of the studies which compose the whole work.

At some levels, the women' difficulties might be inscribed into the context of gender inequalities in which they grew up and that, by virtue of specific cultural aspects, promotes the assumption for African women of predetermined and subordinated positions probably making women less used to talking about their life and maybe less inclined to express their emotions.

On the other hand, from a psychoanalytical gendered perspective, these difficulties impose also a necessary reflection about the identity dimension of femininity and its consequences in case of gendered-violence episodes which many asylum seekers women are subjected to.

The gender violence, in fact, in its significance of "trauma without appeal", is constantly accompanied by the shame (Troisi, 2018). The shame of violence is always, first of all, a bodily shame as expression of a body that is no longer able to guarantee and maintain its narcissistic identity (Margherita & Troisi, 2014). The post-traumatic shame often causes a fracture between the mental experience of violence and the way in which others look at the "victim", making more difficult for her the possibility to "look" at it, "talk" and "think" about it.

As suggested by Clare et al. (2014), above all for asylum-seeking women, by virtue of their fragilities and vulnerabilities, it could be very difficult to ask for help and so for others notice they need it. Therefore, it becomes fundamental for healthcare and social

professionals being more aware of these dynamics and trying to improve sensitivity in dealing with these.

In such terms, thinking about new ways to improve the knowledge about the women experiences and to “contact” asylum seekers’ women becomes more and more a fundamental challenge for health and social services of non-western societies, not only in order to prevent any negative consequences on mental health caused by traumatic experiences and by the extreme attempt to forget and cover them but also in order to promote a mentalizing reflection about all these dynamics (Caretti, Craparo & Schimmenti, 2013).

## 6.2. Introduction

According to the UNHCR, among the generable category of asylum seekers and refugees, accompanied minors, unaccompanied children and women have to be considered as vulnerable populations by virtue of specific needs and susceptibility.

With specific reference to women, in 1991, the UNHCR issued a set of guidelines on the protection of refugee women highlighting actions to be taken in order to increase their international protection and advocating improvements in the determination procedures to increase the access of women to the refugee status (UNHCR, 1991). In 1995, further guidelines were issued to face with the specific problem of sexual violence, related to gender specific persecution. Moreover, in 2002, further guidelines on international protection and gender related persecution were published (UNHCR, 2002).

Despite these actions and despite the issue of female refugees and asylum seekers have attracted increasing attention within the international debate, problems still remain in the implementation of these policies (Freedman, 2008). The international protection system has, in fact, often failed in meeting refugee women’s need due to the lack of resources and of knowledge about their specific condition and needs (Freedman, 2010).

On a psychological level, although the displacement phenomenon, in its current serious state, is relatively recent and the international literature on asylum seekers and refugees is wide and continually developing, research and reviews on asylum seekers and refugees’ women is rather underdeveloped and disorganized (Kalt et al., 2013).



Where studies have focused on women as forced migrants, they have often looked at specific aspects of their migratory experiences: their experiences of persecution (Crawley, 2001), their unequal access to the asylum determination process (Asgary & Segar, 2011; Crawley, 2001), and above all, their higher exposure to sexual violence (Bradley & Tawfiq, 2006; Rogstad & Dale, 2004; Boersma, 2003).

As highlighted by the UNHCR (2003) as well as by different other studies (Keygnaert, Vettenburg & Temmerman, 2012; Ward & Vann 2002; Hynes & Lopes 2000) asylum seekers and refugee' women have a high vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence representing the category more affected by physical and sexual violence than any other female category in the world.

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is a major public health issue worldwide and represents an extreme violation of human rights. It comprises sexual violence, emotional-psychological violence, physical violence, harmful cultural practices and socio-economic violence (Basile & Saltzman, 2002; UNHCR 2003). Different studies (Ellsberg et al., 2008; Tavara, 2006; Norredam et al., 2005; Campbell, 2002; Coker et al., 2000; Hynes and Lopes 2000) have also shown its negative effects on well-being as well as its consequences on sexual, reproductive, physical and psychological health.

Different psychological studies have, in fact, highlighted the higher vulnerability for women to develop post-traumatic stress symptoms, anxiety and depression (Clare et al., 2014; Hapke et al., 2006; Silove et al., 1997) but the role played by the gender dimension and its exploration still remain underdeveloped (Kalt et al., 2013).

In fact, as suggested by Kalt et al. (2013) in their systematic review on asylum seekers, violence and health, more than 75% of studies did not disaggregate any prevalence data by gender, limiting the evidence available to inform policies that might be more sensitive to women's distinctive experience and vulnerabilities in the asylum process. Moreover, as highlighted by Chantler (2011), even if all asylum seekers are subject to the same policies, the experiences of women are frequently submerged within the general category of "asylum seekers" which obscures their specificities. Hunt (2008) has named this phenomenon as a

tendency to a “gender neutrality” which seems deny or hide the specific problems and needs of refugees or asylum seekers women.

### 6.2.1 Aims

The present study was properly conducted with the first intention to start to fill this gap in order to increase the knowledge towards the experiences of asylum seekers women hosted in Italy with an in-depth examination of the gender dimension.

Therefore, the focus of this work was to explore the pre-migratory, migratory and post-migratory experiences and the area of meanings that a small group of asylum seekers women gave to their experiences.

## 6.3. Materials and Methods

### 6.3.1 The methodological approach: the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2008; Smith, 1995) was chosen as privileged methodological approach by virtue of different aspects.

First of all, the characteristics of the IPA allow a prolific dialogue with the psychodynamic perspective which constitutes the theoretical background of the study.

Considering the *ideographic* nature of the IPA approach, this methodology allows to give an active role to the participant and to his/her personal view of world. The IPA approach is, in fact, a form of research with an idiographic focus on specific details, allowing to study the peculiarity of a single case and avoiding the aims to reach general principles and norms. Therefore, it follows a double hermeneutics: participants try to give sense to their experiences and, the researcher tries to understand the sense given by participant to their experiences. Moreover, the IPA approach, considering participants as the real expert of the topic being researched, allows a *phenomenological* research in the attempt to give more importance to the narrative truth than to the objective one. In the phenomenological perspective, in fact, the knowledge of the investigated phenomena has to be conducted free from theoretical presuppositions in order to freely explore the topic without pre-concepts or

previous hypothesizes.

The IPA methodology is composed by different steps which define both phases of implementation of the research' design and data analysis.

First, starting from the general aim of the study, the IPA requires to develop a semi-structured interview able to guide the research during the conversation but, at the same time, to let free the researcher from being too much intrusive. The development of an interview' scheme allows to prevent difficulties and to develop ideas about the management of the possible difficulties. The scheme and the interview' areas have to be learned in order to act as stimuli during the conversation.

Second, the IPA approach imposed a precise selection of participants. Considering the idiographic nature of the approach, the IPA requires a very homogeneous group, a group able to reflect the specificities of the research' questions. Moreover, according to the IPA principles, the homogeneity of the sample is more important than its numerosness.

Finally, the IPA approach required specific steps for the analysis of the interviews. The IPA process of data analysis needs of an iterative analysis which provides a strong interaction between the reader/researcher and the text. After having transcribed the interviews, the researcher reads more than once the texts in order to familiarise with the participants' narratives: first, each interview has to be paraphrased; then, the researcher writes comments, notes and connections to the text on the basis of his/her interpretation of the text. From this first step of analysis, some *subordinate themes* will emerge. Their number usually reflects the richness of a specific passage in the text. The connection between the emergent themes on the basis of their contents determines the formation of *superordinate themes* which represent a sort of meaning containers of the emergent themes.

### 6.3.2 Participants

This study was made possible through the drafting of a protocol between the University of Naples Federico II and a Neapolitan Association which manages a female Extraordinary Reception Centre which hosts 25 Nigerian and Gambian asylum seekers women. All women were contacted through the Association and were met in order to ask their will and

availability to take part in the research. Out 25 women, just 5 allowed to take part in the research. The group of participants was extremely homogeneous, accordingly with IPA principles, and presented the following characteristics:

- coming from Nigeria;
- being young women (range of age: 23-26);
- being mothers;
- being English speaking;
- being asylum seekers waiting for the evaluation made by the Territorial Committee.

Specifically, all women interviewed were Nigerian and English speaking. All were young adults, between 23 and 26 years old (mean age 23.8). All were Christian. All of them started the secondary school but only two of them completed it. All of them were mothers of babies in the first childhood but just one of them was married and reached Italy with her husband. All of them left babies in their country of origin and one of them discovered to be pregnant of her fourth child in Italy. All of them were waiting for the evaluation by the Territorial Committee and were hosted in the same female Extraordinary Reception Centre in province of Naples. All of them left Nigeria for security reasons (religious and/ or terroristic persecution) and reached Italy through the route of the central Mediterranean Sea from Libya since almost one year (mean time 14.6 months) (Tab. 1).

*Table 1. Characteristics of participants*

<b>Pseudo nym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Years of Education</b>	<b>Reasons why left</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>N. children</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>In Italy since</b>
<b>TO</b>	23	Christian	Nigeria	8	Persecution	No	1	Asylum seeker	12 months
<b>Mercy</b>	23	Christian	Nigeria	12	Persecution	No	1	Asylum seeker	15 months
<b>Yobosa</b>	26	Christian	Nigeria	9	Persecution	Yes	4	Asylum seeker	18 months
<b>Favour</b>	23	Christian	Nigeria	11	Persecution	No	1	Asylum seeker	16 months
<b>Blessed</b>	24	Christian	Nigeria	12	Persecution	No	1	Asylum seeker	12 months

### *6.3.3 Setting and Procedures*

After the first collective meeting, participants were met individually, in a room made available by the Centre, in presence of a Nigerian female interpreter who usually works with women during the Centres activities.

A total of three meetings were performed.

During the first meeting, participants were explained in-depth the aim of the study, were asked to sign their consent form to the research with the aim to provide confidentiality and anonymity for the participants involved in the study (Jenkins, 2010; Smith et al., 2009). Pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of the participants. All the steps of the present study were approved by the Appointed Committee and carried on in accordance with the World Health Organization ethics guidelines (2011) and with the International Ethical Guidelines for Health-related Research Involving Humans (Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences, 2016).

During the first meeting they were also asked to complete an anonymous form with some socio-demographical information (Table 1).

During a second meeting, participants were interviewed in a semi-structured way.

Finally, a third conclusive meeting were performed.

### *6.3.4 Instruments*

The semi-structured interview was carried out face-to face by the author in English. All the interviews were audio-recorded and lasted an average of 30 min.

As mentioned above, the semi-structured interview was developed on the basis of the IPA principles. In particular, it was used the focused-narrative-interview developed by Arcidiacono (2012) which follows the IPA principles and allows the spontaneous production of contents and emotions from participants. This kind of interview gives to the researcher an active role in choosing how and when collect the information.

The semi-structured interview was divided into three thematic areas that explored:

- the participants' life in Africa;
- the migratory time;

-the participants' life in Italy.

The main questions used to guide the interviews were:

-participants' life in Africa: *How was your life in Africa before the journey? According to you, how is life in Africa for a girl?*

-the migratory phases: *What do you remember about your journey? How is the journey for a woman...*

-participants' life in Italy: *How is your life in Italy? How is life in Italy for an African girl?*

It is important to highlight that all the areas were explored with a particular attention to the gender dimension in the attempt to explore and understand something more regarding participants' feelings and meanings as women.

#### 6.3.5 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using the procedure described in the IPA process (Smith, 2011). Therefore, all the interviews were transcribed *verbatim*<sup>16</sup> and analysed individually and the different stages of the analyses were cross-checked at various intervals by the author, her supervisor and the research group they work with.

#### 6.4. Findings

Four superordinate themes, each with different sub-themes, emerged (Table 2). Table 2 will show themes illustrating their frequencies for each participant. The subordinate themes were named on the basis of the participants' words in order to respect the idiographic nature of the IPA process.

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<sup>16</sup> The transcription activities were the same described for the previous study (see Chapter 5).

Table 2. Superordinate and subordinate themes

Superordinate and subordinate themes	TO	Mercy	Yobosa	Favour	Blessed
<b>1. The time of the hell</b>					
1a “The desert push yourself beyond your physical limits”	*	*		*	*
1b “Since I arrived in Libya, I understood I was in the hell...”	*	*	*	*	*
1c “On the boat you are between life and death”	*	*	*	*	*
<b>2. Survive in a foreign country</b>					
2a “I feel like a survivor...”	*	*			
2b “I am trying to be able to cope with my new life...”	*	*	*	*	*
2c “I can’t imagine my future; it is unpredictable...”	*	*		*	*
<b>3. No Countries for African women: between commitments and vulnerabilities</b>					
3a “In Africa you have no choice: you have to get married and to have babies”	*	*	*	*	*
3b “On the Libya road, boys are tortured, girls are raped”	*	*	*	*	*
3c “For Italian people, we are just prostitutes...”	*		*		*
<b>4. The Mandate of Motherhood</b>					
4a “I left to protect me and my children”	*	*	*	*	*
4b “If I died in the sea, nobody could have find my body and my children will never see me again...”	*		*		
4c “Living in Italy without your children is not easy but I would like to bring them here”	*	*	*	*	*

### 1. The time of the hell

The first superordinate theme gives testimony of the time of the journey which started on the Libya road through the desert and finished once being rescued. First, it expresses the participants experience in facing with the extreme conditions of the desert: (1a) “The desert push yourself beyond your physical limits” is the way in which the experience of crossing

the desert is lived: as an extreme physical challenge as well as the beginning of the experience of familiarisation with human rights violation and death:

*“The desert was...sleeping hard...no food, no water...  
some people drink urine...”* [Blessed]

*“When I crossed the desert one person fell down from the vehicle and the driver didn’t stop to wait...We were shouting...but when you are there, it becomes a matter of life or death...”* [Favour]

*“At the checkpoints Arab men stop you and before continuing the journey they ask you “Do you have any money?”. You must give them money if you want to continue your journey because if you don’t have any money...they could kill you or they can do other terrible things”* [Mercy]

In all cases, the experience of Libya represented the higher point of human rights violation: (1b) “When I arrived in Libya, I understood I was in the hell...”. There, all participants lived an increasing experience of violence connected with the experience of imprisonment and of tortures usually made by Libyan men to African black people:

*“Arab men consider black people like dogs...they are racists; they hate black...we are just a business for them...”* [TO]

*“My life in Libya was more than terrible: malnutrition...maltreatments...no sleeping well...you have to seat on the floor in a small place with a lot of people...sleeping on seating during the nights...no place for bodily function...you have just to seat...they usually hit you...they don’t give you food...and if you want to drink water they give to you salt water...”* [Mercy]

*“I was imprisoned in Sabha...”*

*We were sold to that men...and put in prison...was more than scaring... they gave us small small food...a little of water...and they torture people, forcing to call families to have money for your release...”* [Blessed]



Finally, (1c) “On the boat you are between life and death” shows the experience of crossing the Mediterranean Sea which is lived as an experience of extreme suspension during which women became witness of the others’ death and began to believe they were going to die too:

*“oh...on the boat you are between life and death...you don’t see nothing...you don’t see land; you don’t see lights...all around is black... you can’t see nothing...”* [Mercy]

*“after many people fell inside the sea, the boat repositioned to a flat position but by the time of the reposition, we look around many people were gone, five or six people we were together, no one of them survived because they did not leave the boat.”* [Yobosa]

*“I knew that 47 people died that night...47...we were 130 on the boat...I thought I were going to die...I was quite sure.”* [Blessed]

## **2. Survive in a foreign country**

The second superordinate theme is representative of the participants’ life in Italy and expresses feelings, challenges and limits regarding a new life in a foreign country.

(2a) “I feel like a survivor...” sends back to the area of feelings expressed by some participants once arrived in Italy. This feeling is always accompanied by the recall of whom died during the journey configuring a possible area of guilt which probably needs to be more in-depth explored:

*“I always thank God...and of course the Italian Government for having saved me...I was lucky, other people were not...”* [TO]

*“I feel like a survivor...I crossed the hell...and I survived...I looked so many people lost their life...”* [Mercy]

(2b) “I am trying to be able to cope with my new life...” is the theme which expresses the participants’ efforts to integrate themselves in a foreign country doing many activities that range from the Italian lessons to experiment themselves in learning new jobs:

*“I am trying to integrate myself, small small...I went to a waitress course...I am searching for a job but without documents it is difficult...”* [Favour]

*“At first it was very difficult learning the language and communicating but then I attended Italian lessons...and now I am improved. Now when I am in the street I know how to ask for directions and I can communicate with other people...”* [Blessed]

*“I have learned the...”uncineto”...I tried to sell something I made in a little market...Oh and I learned also to do “treccine” [lol]...I watched You-tube videos...and I am quite good”* [Yobosa]

Finally, this theme gives also testimony of the impossibility of representativeness of the future: (2c) “I can’t imagine my future; it is unpredictable...”. This unpredictability, on one hand, seems to be concretely connected to the asylum granting time and to the social-juridical suspension lived by asylum seekers. On the other hand, it sends also back to the identity suspension lived which seems to configure a “porous area” where not only the imaginative capabilities but also the desire ones are compromised:

*“For now my future is like a question mark...I am year since one year and I don’t know nothing... regarding my documents or Commission...regarding me...”* [Blessed]

*“I can’t imagine my future...I am waiting just to know something more about it...I am trying to do my best...”* [Mercy]

*“I can’t know how my future will be...I don’t know nothing about my document...there is a lot of delay for them...”* [Favour]

### **3. No Countries for African women: between commitments and vulnerabilities**

The third superordinate theme is expression of a gender dimension which is transversal to all life phases explored through the semi-structured interview. It could be seen, in fact, as an identity dimension which deeply belongs to all participants defining and characterising their experiences. (1) “In Africa you have no choice: you have to get married and to have babies” represents the way in which all participants describe the female roles in Africa which seem characterised by a sort of written destiny:

*“In Africa, if you are a girl no one invest in your education...men can go to University, girls no...” [TO]*

*“Being a girl in Africa is not really easy...there are a lot of expectation from you... is hard...you have to become an African woman...you have to know a lot of things...people expect you get married and have babies...when you got pregnant without married the pregnancy is a stigma on you” [Mercy]*

*“In Africa a girl has no choice...we can't study and elevate ourselves like men...we have to get married, take care of family...” [Yobosa]*

Moreover, the gender dimension seems to represent also a “negative brand” which many times exposes to high risks during the trip (3b) “On the Libya road, boys are tortured, girls are raped...”:

*“Being a girl during the trip is very dangerous...on the Libya road, boys are usually tortured and beaten, girls are raped...” [Mercy]*

*“I can't lie to you...At the camp in Libya, some Libyan men wanted sleep with me...my husband protected me...people called him “bodyguard”.” [Yobosa]*

*“It is hard if you are a girl and if you don't have money...they rape you...men are bitten, girls are raped or sold into prostitution...” [Favour]*

The third subordinate theme (3c) “For Italian people we are just prostitutes...” expresses the way in which the “negative brand” still remain and is declined in Italy where a stereotyped view of Nigerian girls is perceived:

*“For Italian people we are just prostitutes...they look at us badly...they are very discriminant...” [TO]*

*“Nigerian girls are seen as prostitutes...discrimination yeah...a lot of discrimination, I don’t know why...maybe for our skin colour but I think we are all human being...” [Yobosa]*

#### **4. The mandate of Motherhood**

As the third one, the fourth superordinate theme is expression of a gendered dimension shared by participants: their motherhood. The mother identity seems to play for all participants a protective keyrole in different phases of their life. (4a) “I left to protect me and my children” represent the theme connected to the reasons of the journey. The condition of motherhood and the responsibility for being a mother seem to be connected to an area of agency which attribute to them an active role normally denied in their culture:

*“I was not safe there...I left to protect me and my baby...I did not bring him with me because I did not know if I will arrive alive or not...” [Mercy]*

*“I cannot take my children with me because I knew the journey was dangerous...Now I know I made a good choice even if difficult...” [Yobosa]*

*“If I remained, I put my baby’ life in danger...I had to left to safe him...” [Blessed]*

The motherhood seems also a protective dimension relatively to the possibility to resist and do not give up (4b) “If I died in the sea, nobody could have find my body and my children will never see me again...”:

*“One part of my mind told me that I have to resist...if I die in the sea, nobody will find my body and my children will never see me again. When I dragged myself up and held on to one boy, the boy said I should leave him, I said “no I can't leave you if you leave me there, both of us will die”*

[Yobosa]

*“I thought I could not die there because I will never see my baby...”* [Mercy]

Finally, (4c) “Living in Italy without your children is not easy but I would like to bring them here”, on the one hand expresses the way in which the distance from their children affects the new life in Italy. On the other hand, thinking about the possibility of reunion allows the constitution of a representative area about a future that normally is un-thinkable. Just one participant found herself pregnant when arrived in Italy. From participants’ words, this experience represented a stimulus to resist and to survive to the absence of her children:

*“Life in Italy is good and bad. Good because I am safe, bad because I miss my children. Founding me pregnant when I arrive in Italy made me able to go ahead.”* [Yobosa]

*“I don't know nothing about my future but I would like to bring A. here...I want to give him a better life...”* [Mercy]

## 6.5. Discussion

The interviews and the themes emerged showed common feelings and meanings in the way in which participants experience their pre-migratory, migratory and post-migratory experiences.

The first two superordinate themes, which describe the human rights violations that forced migrants are used to live and the strategies of coping used in the attempt to integrate and adapt themselves in a new, foreign environment, represent an important testimony of women capability to resist and go ahead, despite challenges and obstacles.

Some brief but useful reflection can be given about the gender dimensions and their strong interconnection with cultural and contextual aspects.

The culture of belonging and the nationality of participants strongly influence a particular idea of “African girl”: for girls, in fact, the access to University is normally denied, no one usually invests on their future, they are destined to perform previous written roles that, usually transmitted intergenerationally and transgenerationally (Margherita et al., 2017), determine a strong context of gender inequality (Makama, 2013; Omonubi-McDonnell, 2003).

According to participants’ words, African girls have just one future: become wives and mothers dedicating their life to the taking care of the family. Therefore, cultural and contextual aspects strongly define a specific idea of “woman” which somehow all Nigerian women end up to follow. However, confirming a previous research (Babatunde-Sowole et al., 2016), the characteristics of participants, in particular their being single mother, except one of them, the fact that the condition of being a single mother is strongly discriminated in Nigeria and the decision to flee, seemed also suggest the existence of an active agency of participants in rising up predetermined roles.

Furthermore, some brief reflections can be also outlined regarding the participants’ self-perception of being “black and female” that emerged as “negative brands” for both dimension of ethnicity and gender which, during the journey as well as in Italy, expose to wide episodes of discrimination.

From participants’ words, in fact, sexual violence’ episodes emerged as a common ritual that most African women experience during the journey due to the discrimination acted by Arab men in Libya. Moreover, the same “negative brand” is experienced in Italy where the discrimination emerges along the symmetric association Nigerian girls-prostitutes by virtue of ethnic and gender stereotypes.

Femininity dimension emerged as strongly embedded in cultural and ethnic aspects and is, therefore, described by virtue of the perceived gender inequality, as a risk factor that exposes to fragilities and difficulties.

The experience of motherhood, instead, emerged, as a very supportive factor in pushing to run away from Nigeria, resisting to the adversities as well as promoting a desire area about the future that usually is denied due to the social-juridical and identity suspension lived as asylum seekers. Confirming previous studies (Clare et al., 2014; Kennedy & Murphy-

Lawless, 2003) motherhood assumed, therefore, a protective role in promoting resilient characteristics, not just during the journey but also once arrived in Italy in facing with the challenges of integration. Also looking at the case of Yobosa, who found herself pregnant in Italy, the pregnancy acted as a stimulus to overcome the difficulties and the feelings of guilt that a mother experiences in leaving her children behind (Tessitore, Troisi, & Margherita, 2016).

Looking at the gender dimension as a fluid dimension that guarantees the identity unit, interviews seemed to suggest a sort of failure in the integration process of the different gender roles of women and mothers generating a splitting that may need to be integrated in order to restore unit to the whole gender identity.

Some brief reflections could be outlined regarding the possibility to develop programmes and strategies able to promote a change in direction in the way in which asylum seekers' women look at their femininity giving value not only to the supportive aspects of motherhood but also recovering, working on agency, the positive aspects connected to the femininity and to the female body destroyed by ethnic and gender inequalities.

In conclusion, some reflections could be offered regarding the characteristics of women's interviews which, as noticed in men during the exploratory study (see Chapter 3), seemed to not assume the characteristics of narratives.

From a qualitative observation and analysis, they were, in fact, very brief and lacking of emotional references. Moreover, women usually described events as clichés avoiding entering in the deepness of their subjective experience. Although these aspects could be seen as fundamental defensive strategies in order to “repair” the Self from the suffering connected to the past memories and to the relationship with the Other maybe perceived as “intrusive”; this data also suggested the need to explore and build for women too more suitable ways and tools able to stimulate the life story tale.

However, even though the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview turned out to be a useful instrument in exploring male asylum seekers' experiences, the data emerged from the present study raised up some considerations on its feasibility for women.

The experiences of sexual and gender-based violence, which from the participants' words seem to be lived by most of women during the journey, remain a foreclosed experience in

their life, a sort of “agglutined nucleus” (Bleger, 1974) that, in order to be named (but not narrated), needed of a mental dissociation (i.e., “women are usually raped”) with reference to a generalised female identity dimension. What could happen to women when such things that are not representable in mind, become “visible”? How much they would be able to tolerate such a primitive language as the one vehicled by pictures? All these questions still remain opened and still need to be thought.

In conclusion, the study is not free from limitations. The number of participants is, in fact, very low and gave a small sample for the analysis. Therefore, future research needs to extend the number of participants in order to increase knowledge on risk as well as protective factors for asylum seekers’ women. In this sense, for further researches it could be also interesting to make a comparison between mothers’ and non-mothers’ asylum seekers in the attempt to examine in-depth which factors act as protective dimensions for asylum seekers women who are not mothers.



## Conclusions

Taking a psychodynamic perspective, the present research project has tried to gradually explore the complex phenomenon of forced migration with a focus on the relationship between trauma and narrative in asylum seekers.

I think the number of studies that compose the present work well reflects my attempt to deal with the elusive nature of migrations (Raison, 1980). At the same time, they should be seen as the reflection of my “journey” in this field that, like any journey, has incurred obstacles, achievements and, of course, limits.

The exploratory study represented the first step made in the attempt to understand the forced migratory phenomenon. It shed light on the complexity of the asylum seekers’ experience suggesting the need to adopt a broader approach to explore it, not focusing solely on symptoms (Varvin, 2016) nor on the investigation of *devastating events* (Papadopoulos, 2007). It showed also the deep *identity fracture* (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1990) produced by migration, suggesting the need to promote an urgent re-connection with the origins in the attempt to re-give unity to their identity.

The exploratory study also showed the difficulties involved in the research/clinical intervention with asylum seekers shedding light on the crisis of the classical methods and model of thinking in the encounter with a different social and cultural background and with the emergency nature of forced migration. This crisis normally produces a suspension state in researchers’ as well as in clinicians’ minds, very similar to the one lived by asylum seekers on both the social-juridical and identity level (Margherita & Tessitore, *under review*). On the one hand, researchers and clinicians are more and more called to *familiarise* with the inhuman experiences lived by asylum seekers, hosting *trauma* in their mind before asylum seekers themselves (De Micco, 2017); on the other hand, the humanitarian concern that the recent migratory waves produced, more and more required to support and encourage the understanding of this social-identity-cultural phenomenon, searching for new models and “new paths” (Tessitore & Margherita, 2017).

The urgency to find “new ways” clearly emerged by the limit of a “pure” narrative method, as the in-depth interview used in the exploratory study, that showed its insufficiency

in exploring the asylum seekers' experiences, calling back inexorably the relationship between trauma and narrative that, even more in asylum seekers, is complicated by virtue of the ambiguous dimensions that the narrative device assumes.

With this in mind, the second step carried out was aimed at developing a new instrument: an images-mediated narrative interview. Gaining from psychoanalysis the fundamental role played by the iconic register on the psyche, it was thought that pictures able to reflect the asylum seekers experiences could assume and act as a function of representation in absence of representativeness and could configure themselves as a "support to the word" able to promote the production of narratives. The so-termed Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview was developed through a mixed methodology composed by some focus groups conducted with asylum seekers so that the "images", that constituted the basis of the photographs chosen to mediate the interview, could have born from themselves, as representative of their whole life story. The final version of the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview was composed by 9 photographs chosen from the dossiers of a Neapolitan photographer who works with migrants.

It is an instrument that, by virtue of the research steps carried out for its development and of the characteristics of the photographs, should be considered specifically aimed to explore the experiences of Anglophone African male asylum seekers who arrived in Italy through the main migratory route of the Central Mediterranean from Libya. This aspect could be considered, at the same time, a strong as well as a fragility point of the instrument. The fragility point is connected to its limited feasibility to other populations. However, its strong point could be tracked into its culture-sensitivity, that represents an important aspect considering the fundamental role played by cultural aspects in defining identity, experiences and relational models. Anyway, the whole research steps that accompanied the development of the new instrument could be also considered as a proposal for a new procedure to develop other images-mediated narrative interviews referred to other target populations.

Further, considering pictures as a deep emotional activator, the whole study has led not only to the development of an instrument but to the implementation of a wider methodology that needs to be inscribed into a strictly thought setting, shedding also light on the importance to build and set up a mental and physical space where experiences can be

narrated. In this sense, each study carried out during the PhD years has planned no less of four meetings with participants precisely in order to explore experiences in a “secure space” and in an emotional atmosphere of trust. In this regard, the final encounters were fundamental in the attempt to “give back something” to the subject, to offer a return, in an interchange view that is the basis of any relationship.

The third step carried out was aimed at understanding the effects of the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview on narratives. The study planned two identical experimental conditions in which a group of asylum seekers was administered by the Asylum Seekers Images Mediated Narrative Interview and another group by a non-images-mediated interview. Both groups’ risk and protective factors were also assessed in order to describe participants and to better understand the potentiality or the limit of the new instrument in more or less vulnerable situations. The results showed the potentiality of the new methodology in increasing the possibility for asylum seekers to put in words their emotions, to reflect upon their experiences, to facilitate the temporal connections between events, starting the difficult process of giving meaning to experiences. The exploration of risk and protective factors confirmed their high levels of resilience, the importance to avoid making causal link between the impact of devastating events and the development of post-traumatic syndromes, testifying the need to go beyond universally accepted diagnostic categories, and the fundamental role played by post-migratory determinants.

Moreover, the in-depth qualitative analysis of the images-mediated interviews collected during this study has also conducted to the proposal of a Grid to code the new instrument. This step of research was useful above all to understand the specificities and the dimensions that the new instrument allowed to catch as well as the functions assumed by pictures during the life story narrative. One of the most important function assumed by pictures could be tracked in their capability to mediate the relationship between the asylum seeker and the researcher/clinician. The photographs, in fact, in giving representation to the asylum seekers experiences, assumed the value of a testimony, embodying, in the *hic et nunc* of the research, the inner witness that is normally disrupted during extreme experiences but it also so vital for making meaning of experiences (Viñar, 2017). At the same time, this function conferred to the researcher the privilege of becoming an external witness of experiences that normally

he or she cannot know either imagine because he did not live them. In making visible the invisible, the pictures put the basis for the building of a space in which researcher can *see* and so *testify* the asylum seekers' experiences, recognising them, confirming them and offering them a space where they could be hosted. Witnessing of the atrocities lived by the Other, somehow puts the basis for the building, across time, of a "space for thinking" and for the restoring of the social links disrupted by trauma.

Moreover, the images also allowed subjects to chronologically connect the events. As during an art exhibition, the subject re-views his life story in the attempt to re-connect its temporal threads.

The development of the Grid, even though in progress, confirmed the clinical potentialities of the new methodology that could offer useful information about which personal history' areas are more or less thinkable for asylum seeker and, so, treatable from a clinical point of view. It could also suggest the right timing for each subject to explore those areas in order to plan and develop person-centred and culture-sensitive clinical interventions.

The last step of the whole work, not for nothing put at the end of it, metaphorically represented the encounter with the limit, with everything that is not thinkable for the psyche.

If the Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview has showed how far research with asylum seekers will go, the study carried out with asylum seekers' women represented the encounter with the mind' areas that host the un-thinkable either non-visible experiences. The exploration of women experiences, declinated and embedded in the complex dimension of femininity, showed the protective role acted by motherhood and, at the same time, the splitting between the mother identity and the female one, even more powered by the context of gender and ethnic inequalities in which women have grown up, have come across and are hosted in Italy.

The dimension of sexual and gender-based violence that each woman or most of women lives during the journey from Nigeria to Libya in the attempt to reach Italy, remains a foreclosed experience in their life, as a sort of "agglutined nucleus" (Bleger, 1974). The non-representable and unthinkable experience of rape can be named only with reference to a generalised identity dimension, from which participants needed to distance in the attempt to

keep a psychic integrity. This aspect raises up wider and unexplored questions to what extent women could have been able to tolerate the primitive language of emotions aroused by pictures and to deal with the non-visible that becomes visible.

Finally, I would like to conclude offering a view on the social-political Italian situation which represented the background of the whole research project. This project started in 2016 and finished in 2018. During these years the social and political situation in Italy has undergone many changes. We have moved from a “welcoming” Italy, even though with all flaws and imperfections derived from the “eyewash” always provoked by emergency situations, to an Italy that has adopted slogans as #closetheports and/or #beforetheItalians.

These slogans, slowly but inexorably, have been encysted in the Italians mind as consequence of a ruthless political propaganda guided by the right-wing political parties that, not just in Italy but worldwide, ended up projecting the fear of the “unknown” on the external reality, bringing a hopeless research of scapegoats.

Refugees, today more than ever, emblem of the foreigners, seem to become the enemy to combat and destroy. Our relationship with them, as argued by Varvin (2017), always implies confrontation with the alien and uncanny on societal, group as well as individual levels.

How much and on what levels these changes influenced the whole work?

A lot, and on at least two levels: the participants’ one and, of course, mine.

The interviews collected during the third study have been administered between 2017 and 2018. From them, the migrants’ perception of a different Italian atmosphere, a hate climate of which themselves have been witnesses or victims, emerged very clearly. Moreover, as testified also by post-migratory difficulties lived by participants, more and more during our interactions, they expressed the fear of a forthcoming “mass deportation”, threatened and dreamed by the same right wings that now govern Italy. All these aspects constantly influenced our relationship and, of course, my point of view.

As for me, I have learnt how narrow the boundaries between research, clinical practice and advocacy can be.

Wisława Szymborska in *Children of the age* (1988) recited:

*Whether you like it or not,  
your genes have a political past,*

*your skin, a political cast,  
your eyes, a political slant.  
Whatever you say reverberates,  
whatever you don't say speaks for itself.  
So either way you're talking politics.*

Currently, these words reflect my emotional state more than ever.

Therefore, in a world that seems more and more ready to look away, where the right-wing politics are inciting acting out to the detriment of the building of "spaces for thinking", I wish the present work could also encourage to *see* and to *think*, to give voice to people who have lost their voice, to give representation to the most unrepresentable thing existing in the world: the human atrocity.

I wish the present work could be a witness itself, contributing to *offer asylum* to the visible and, most-times, invisible wounds met on its path.

To do that, I honestly do not know better way than leave the reader to the words of who has survived even if will take forever on the skin and in the psyche the consequences of this survival...

*...In Nigeria I saw situations that were out of control...  
...living in Africa is difficult, especially if you live in poverty. Here you are lucky because you have human rights and respect for laws. In Africa if you are poor, you could be happy but you will be no respected. No one respect you as human being.  
...In Africa if you born alone, you will be alone forever...*

*...Libyan...Libyan men use immigrate to make money...  
...Arab people took blacks life like an animal been kept in a cage...  
...Many people die not even on the sea and not in the desert but in Libya. [...] They can just come and start shooting...  
...In prisons they take candle wax and use on people. They will tire the person and be dropping the the wax on his body. Sometimes they will put water on the person and use electric to shock that person on the penis...*

*...I saw something on You-tube yesterday about a woman that died in the sea with a baby. They said they wanted to rescue the woman and ask Libya to take them back to Libya but she refused...*

*...We spent many hours on the boat, it was the hardest experience of my life...  
...three people died because we did not have space, you have to struggle to stay on the boat ... the waves were too big, the boat was not stable...I prayed...I thought we may die or may not...Especially when water entered the boat. People were crying, there were also some pregnant women in the boat. People were shouting...all were afraid...  
...Before they rescued us...I was so hungry and thirsty to the extent that I drank the sea water....and when rescue ship arrived...oh...I started crying for joy...*

*...I love Italy, even if in the last period, I have heard much more racist episodes towards black people...I don't think that all Italian are racist, but I have experienced some episodes. For example, if you go to Napoli, in the train you see that Italian people avoid to seat beside black people. Maybe it is for our "smell", because someone said it is for our "smell". I usually wash myself. I have heard about some racist episodes also on TV. I understood that in Italy the political climate is changing and that today tolerance towards different people is less compared to the past...*

*...I believe we are in modern era, such things shouldn't exist in Europe but I saw a lot of discrimination in Italy, there was a time one of our black brother work in Mechanical Workshop with an Italian brother in Castel Volturno and, at the end of work day, the Italian man was paid €100 but mine black brother was paid €50 that was half of what an Italian man collected with the equal work. I think it is because of human colour or race but in the modern world racism still dominate Italian people and I still don't know why...  
...I don't know if my future will be in Italy because I like to accept everybody the way they are and respect people's opinion. I don't see all these attributes in Italian people, if I will have my way I will not like to stay in Italy...*

...and, of course, to the photographs of a man who has bravely observed their pains and resistance from close up (Appendix A) ...

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## Appendices

Appendix A - *The photographs of the Asylum Seekers Images-mediated Narrative*  
Interview by Giulio Piscitelli













## Appendix B - Narratives' Coding Scores

### Sample Narrative 1 - Control group:

AS: I'm 30 years. I lived in Nigeria. I went to primary school but I haven't finish the secondary school yet. There was no money to pay the school. So I worked since I was 15. I was repairing engine generator. In Africa **life was difficult** because...I had no money, no help to start up my business. I lived with my mother and my sister. Why I left Nigeria is that all those the politicians, the way they are living in Nigeria **is bad**. When they were doing election like every 4 years they were fighting everywhere. No peace. War at any moment.

**[Coding scores pre-migration experiences: Coherence Context=2; Coherence Chronology=3; Coherence Theme=1; Reflective Insight=0]**

### Sample Narrative 2 – Experimental Group:

Well, these pictures **remind** me of parental love, because no matter how difficult the life may be the parents most always be there knowing that the wish every parents is for the betterment of their children...I was **loved** by my parents. Unfortunately, my father died on the 12 of December 2008 after a brief illness. My mother is still in Nigeria. She is fine. I have also 4 brothers and 2 sisters. I was born into a Family that is full of happy people, we love and care for each other irrespective of whatever. Even as we lost our father the **love** is still in the family just that the vacuum that his death created could not be fill anymore. In Nigeria my life was quit good. I was a Pharmacist and I had my own Pharmacy. The **problems started** when the terrorist entered the community where I was doing business with my father, that was what was lead to his death. Because my father was ill and because of the illness he could not move faster to save his life when the terrorist strikes. Nobody came to his rescue because everybody was running for his own life, he could not make it but gave up to Ghost. The incident took place on the 29 November 2016, my shop was demolished after the death of my father. Life became **worthless** for me and I have to leave the country. Here you may call them terrorists; in Africa, we call them Boko Haram. The problem is that you don't predict when the terrorists attack; sometimes they engage in a battle with the Military. As of the last time that I spoke with my Family they said the situation was getting worst.

**[Coding scores pre-migratory experiences: Coherence Context=3; Coherence Chronology=3; Coherence Theme=2; Reflective Insight=0]**

### **Narrative 3 – Control Group:**

When I was in Libya, Libyan people **treat people bad**, when they take people to work for them they don't pay, they even kidnap people. In Libya they sell girls for prostitution. On the boat **it was bad too**, it was dark around 5am, we spent 16 hours on the boat before seeing the German rescue ship that saved us.

**[Coding scores migratory phase: Coherence Context= 2; Coherence Chronology= 2; Coference Theme= 1; Reflective Insight= 0]**

### **Narrative 4 – Experimental Group:**

Mmm...First, this picture (DESERT) **remind** me the way we walked in the desert. It was April 2016. I passed from Niger to Libya. We were walking in the desert when our vehicle breakdown in the desert until we saw another vehicle that came for our rescue. You know, in the desert there is no food, no water to drink, we saw inscription of crosses where so many people were buried. We went to a place where there is a big well, the driver stops us so that we drink water. There were a lot of vehicles parked very close to the big well, in the process of drawings water from the well someone fell in the well. **It was terrible**. Those drivers were black Arab people, they didn't care for human life, we were forced to leave the person behind because those Arab drivers said the well was so deep. No other option for them to continue the journey. We spent 1 week in the desert. **The journey in the desert was one of the worst experience of my life. It was not a good experience at all. I don't want to remember** that experience, because **it makes me cry** whenever I remember the journey. But i thank Jehovah because I survived. When I arrived in Libya before crossing the sea, I was kidnapped and spent 4 months in the captive den. I was tortured, **I suffered a lot**, like this man in the picture, before my family send money to my captor. You know, some Nigerian people were involved in the kidnapping business for Arab men in order to received his money in Dinars. For that 4 months we were given a small bread to live on, on each day. Some people were tortured to the point of death, some people that prove difficult in the captive den were shot with gun, women were raped and beaten, that is why some single women come to Italy with pregnancy. I **think** it is **terrible** what an African can live in Libya. You can't imagine. **Sadness. I feel very sad**. Libya is not a safe country. Some set of kidnappers were moving around with cars and guns to kidnap any black people they see walking on the road. Just because black people look like commodity in exchange for money. I **thought** that I made the wrong choice, I **want** to come back to my country but you can't go back. **It's very difficult** to return back to your country, that is why I come to Italy. I had no planned to

come here, but I had to survive. I called my family at home in Nigeria and explained the situation of Libya to them, they send money to me and I continue my journey to the Libyan seaside. On my way to the seaside, those smugglers collected money, phone and food stuff from me, they say I don't need those things any more. But at the sea side there is no food, no water, **it was more difficult** compared to desert. Because you can not bath, communicate till the day someone pushed you on boat. I spend 1 week at seaside in Libya before come to Italy, but that 1 week look like a year to me. The journey to the seaside was **terrible too**. It was not an easy journey, we were smuggled inside in an empty fuel tanker of 33,000 litres, so that the Libyan police at each check point might not see us. If the police see any migrants been smuggled, those migrants people will be arrested and taking to the police prison, so many ways those smugglers used to smuggled migrants people to the seaside. After spent one week at the seaside, I took a boat. A boat like this (BOAT). I was **scared** and **afraid** on the sea for the boat not to deflate. We spend 2 days on the sea before we were rescued. Later we were transferred on the big ship that rescued us, we spend 5 days on the ship before the rescuers took us to Sicily. When we saw the rescue ship, we were like these guys (RESCUE). **Happy**. I was so **happy**, but as at that time people were rushing so that they can be rescued in time. When I entered the big ship was I was **more relaxed**. Because at the sea side in Libya we heard a lot of stories that people perished in the sea, I **thought** I was going to die in the sea.

**[Coding Score Migratory phase: Coherence Context=3; Coherence Chronology=3; Coherence Theme=3; Reflective Insight=0]**

#### **Narrative 5 – Control Group:**

Italy is a peaceful country and I am **happy** here. I haven't seen any bad things yet but the camp is good, there are some laid down rule to follow, like no fighting, cooking is forbidden in the room. I don't have the soggiorno yet, but I know that the camp is working for this at the moment. So I have to wait. This is all I know.

**[Coding scores Post-migratory phase: Coherence Context=1; Coherence Chronology= 0; Coherence Theme=1; Reflective Insight=0]**

#### **Narrative 6 – Experimental Group:**

From Sicily, after being checked up, I went to this camp. If I look this picture (WORK IN ITALY) I can recognise the work in the farm. In this camp people go out for farm work very well but I don't know how the farm work experience looks like, there was a time I worked at the beach but there was

a lot of discrimination there. I **don't really understand** what causes the discrimination, Francesca, but during the day work the lady in charge makes use of blacks for bad routine work and paid each people € 30 for a day work. If someone didn't work very well, the woman in charge reduced the payment to € 25 or € 20 or € 15 until she will give an excuse that the person shouldn't come for beach work any work. I am not working now, I **don't like** working from 8 am in the morning till 6 pm in the evening at the end of the day been paid € 20, it doesn't really make sense but I **love** doing music entertainment, make video shows with less hours and make € 100. I **believe** we are in modern era, such things shouldn't exist in Europe but I saw a lot of discrimination in Italy, there was a time one of our black brother work in Mechanical Workshop with an Italian brother in Castel Volturno and, at the end of work day, the Italian man was paid € 100 but mine black brother was paid € 50 that was half of what an Italian man collected with the equal work. I **think** it is because of human colour or race but in the modern world racism still dominate Italian people and I still don't know why. [Silence] Mmm...Let me speak about this one (ITALIAN LESSON). This picture **reminds** me the camp. As person I don't have problem with the camp, and it is not easy for European Union to keep people in a place and still meet up with people's need on a daily basis and am still **grateful** to the Italian Government for accepting refugee on their soil. Until I got myself the dream job that must be helpful for my own time, but at the moment I don't attend Italian lesson in this camp but, due to my job, I interact with lot of Italian white people, not blacks. When I was in Sicily, we were not given much information of how we should apply for Asylum, learning of Italian language and so many information but when I got this centre, I interact with Italian people that gave adequate information concerning documents and I received a lot of suggestions. I **think** that Italian language is important to integrate ourselves and I **think** that also interact with Italian people is important. I am trying to do this.

**[Coding Scores Post-migratory experiences: Coherence Context=2; Coherence Chronology=2; Coherence Theme=3; Reflective Insight=0]**

Appendix C - *The Asylum Seekers Images-Mediated Narrative Interview Grid*

**THE ASYLUM SEEKERS IMAGES-MEDIATED NARRATIVE INTERVIEW GRID**

**PART A**

**ORDER AND FUNCTIONS OF THE IMAGES**

Pre-migratory Phase=1 Images A-B

Migratory Phase=2 Images C-D-E-F

Post-Migratory Phase=3 Images G-H-I

Phases	Images Order	Images' Function				
		Descriptive	Recognition	Identification	Temporal Link	Intersubjective Link
Break	Interviewer speech					
Break	Interviewer speech					
Break	Interviewer speech					
Break	Interviewer speech					
Break	Interviewer speech					
Break	Interviewer speech					
Break	Interviewer speech					
Break	Interviewer speech					
<b>White</b>	Capability to project in future		Suspension of the capability to project in future			

**PART B**  
**MEANING-GIVING FUNCTIONING**

*Information about the post-traumatic State*

**Total number of interviewer' speeches:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Phase:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Total number of pictures omitted:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Phase in which pictures have been omitted:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Type of images omitted:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Total number of images repeated:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Phase and type of images repeated:** \_\_\_\_\_

*Narratives' Characteristics*

<b>Pre-migratory phase</b>	Chronology: coherent + _____   _____ - incoherent Predominant Emotional Tone: positive + _____   _____ - negative General quality of narrative: fluent + _____   _____ - fragmented
<b>Migratory phase</b>	Chronology: coherent + _____   _____ - incoherent Predominant Emotional Tone: positive + _____   _____ - negative General quality of narrative: fluent + _____   _____ - fragmented
<b>Post-migratory phase</b>	Chronology: coherent + _____   _____ - incoherent Predominant Emotional Tone: positive + _____   _____ - negative General quality of narrative: fluent + _____   _____ - fragmented