DePaul University
UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

DePaul University
Digital Commons@DePaul

College of Science and Health Theses and Dissertations

College of Science and Health

Spring 6-14-2024

Mental Health and Well-being of Survivors of Torture as they Seek Asylum

Samantha L. Nau
DePaul University, snau@depaul.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/csh_etd

Part of the Psychology Commons

Recommended Citation

Nau, Samantha L., "Mental Health and Well-being of Survivors of Torture as they Seek Asylum" (2024). *College of Science and Health Theses and Dissertations*. 531.
https://via.library.depaul.edu/csh_etd/531

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Science and Health at Digital Commons@DePaul. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of Science and Health Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@DePaul. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.

Mental Health and Well-being of Survivors of Torture as they Seek Asylum

A Dissertation

Presented in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

Samantha Nau

June 4, 2024

Department of Psychology

College of Science and Health

DePaul University

Chicago, Illinois

Dissertation Committee

Anne Saw, PhD, Chair

Megan Greeson, PhD

Christine Reyna, PhD

Maria Ferrera, PhD, LCSW

Howard Rosing, PhD

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to everyone who has supported me over the past few years throughout my time in this doctoral program. Firstly, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Anne Saw for all of your mentorship, guidance, and patience. Your compassion and drive to meet the needs of underserved communities, in addition to your ongoing advocacy work for students and communities, inspire me to continue working to serve marginalized communities in my career as a clinical-community psychologist. To my committee, Dr. Megan Greeson, Dr. Christine Reyna, Dr. Maria Ferrera, and Dr. Howard Rosing, thank you all for your support, time, and guidance with my dissertation. I am grateful to have you all as part of my committee. To my community partners, Dr. Martin Hill, Marianne Joyce, and everyone at the Majorie Kovler Center, thank you all for allowing me to train with you all as a student therapist and to work in partnership with you as a researcher. I have learned so much from you all about what it means to meet the needs of asylum seekers who have survived torture. Without your insight and assistance in developing and recruiting for this study, this dissertation study would not have been possible. I want to give a special thanks to all of the clients served at Kovler. Thank you for sharing your stories, your pain, and your aspirations for a better future with me. My hope is that findings from this study can help bring awareness to others about the lived experiences of asylum seekers who have survived torture. Thank you to my amazing team of research assistants, Emily, Sabah, Lydia, Kathy, and Beatriz, for all of your hard work and assistance in helping me analyze the results for this study. I also want to thank Abi for all of your help with providing French interpretation for the interviews. Without you, I would not have been able to understand most of what was said during my interviews. Thank you to my family, mom, dad, Vicky, John, Ely, and Samuel, for your love and support. After all of these years, you can

finally call me a clinical psychologist. I also want to give the biggest shoutout and thanks to all of my friends and colleagues for the endless Zoom writing work groups, check-ins, venting sessions, moral support, and laughter. You all have shown me what it feels like to have a community. Thank you to the Harrison I. Steans Graduate Fellowship program. The financial support that I received as a fellow helped me immensely in funding this study. Finally, thank you to all of my mentors and to my therapist, Ryan, for helping me process, problem solve, and get a fresh perspective during the many moments when I have felt stuck. It has been a long, challenging, and enriching seven years, and I do not know how I would have gotten to this point without you all, so thank you.

Biography

The author was born in Long Island, New York on December 26th, 1990 to parents Simone and Yvan Nau, and sister Victoria. She graduated from Pine Forest Senior High School in 2009. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology and minors in Medical Anthropology and Sexuality Studies from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2013. In 2020, she received her Master of Arts with Distinction degree in Clinical Psychology with a concentration in Community Psychology from DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois. Currently, she is completing her predoctoral internship at Jesse Brown VA Medical Center in Chicago, Illinois. After graduating from the doctoral program, she will complete a one-year clinical psychology postdoctoral Trauma and PTSD fellowship at the Edward Hines, Jr. VA Hospital.

Table of Contents

Dissertation Committee....................ii

Acknowledgements....................iii

Biography....................v

List of Figures....................ix

Abstract....................1

Mental Health and Well-Being of Survivors of Torture as They Seek Asylum....................2

Literature Review....................2

Asylum Seekers and the U.S. Asylum Process....................2

U.S. Asylum Process....................4

Examining the Role of Mental Health in the Immigration Court....................5

Prolonged Insecure Legal Status Due to Backlog in Claims Processing....................8

Stress, Trauma and Other Predictors of Mental Health Outcomes....................10

Exposure to Stress and Trauma Before, During, and After Migration....................10

Mental Health and Insecure Legal Status....................13

Impact of Sociopolitical Climate on Asylum Seekers....................15

Asylum Seekers who are Survivors of Torture: Special Needs and Considerations....................18

Theoretical Framework to Conceptualize the Psychological Experiences of Asylum Seekers....................20

Ecological Systems Theory....................20

Gaps in the Literature....................21

Current Study....................22

Method....................23

Researcher Positionality....................23

Setting....................25

Participants....................27

Sampling Approach....................28

Recruitment....................29

Materials……………………………………………………………………………………31
Interview Protocol……...31
Procedure..32
Interpeter..33
Analysis...34
Establishing Rigor...38
Results…...41
Perspectives on Identity……………………………………………………………………42
Visible vs. Invisible Marginalized Identities…………………………………………...42
Asylum Seeker Identity………………………………………………………………...45
Disconnect From Roles and Purpose……………………………………………………46
Uninformed and Unresponsive Immigration System………………………………………47
Need for Trauma-Informed Approaches…………………………………………………48
Need for Culturally Responsive Approaches…………………………………………….59
Need for Understanding the Sociopolitical Context of Asylum Seekers……………………50
Navigating the Immigration System Without a Roadmap………………………………..52
Self-Advocacy……………………………………………………………………….……53
Learning by Doing………………………………………………………………….…….55
Retraumatizing System…………………………………………………………….……….57
Criminalization of Asylum Seekers……………………………………………….…….58
Retelling One's Story…………………………………………………………….….…60
Internal and External Factors that Shape Experience…………………………………..…62
Protective Factors……………………………………………………………………..…63
Positive Outlook……………………………………………………………….….…..63
Religious Faith…………………………………………………………………...…64
Legal Status………………………………………………………………………..64
Support From Others……………………………………………………………65
Risk Factors……………………………………………………………………………66

Lack of Access to Basic Needs……………………………………………………………66
Family Separation & Social Isolation…………………………………………………68
Discussion…………………………………………………………………..……………70
Sociopolitical Climate……………………………………………………….……………78
Limitations……………………………………………………………………………...80
Future Directions.……………………….………………………………………………..81
References...84
Appendix A: Interview Protocol...98

List of Figures

Figure 1 : Conceptual Framework..100

Figure 2 : Participant Demographic Information..101

Figure 3 : Themes Derived from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis………………..102

Abstract

This study aims to explore experiences of asylum seekers, who are also survivors of torture, as they go through the immigration process. Using semi-structured interviews, this study examined how mental health and well-being are impacted by post-migration stressors associated with the process of seeking asylum and by perceptions of the sociopolitical climate in the United States. Six asylum seekers who have received services from the Marjorie Kovler Center for Survivors of Torture were interviewed. An interpretative phenomenological analysis was conducted to explore how participants make meaning of their experiences and to identify themes that were shared across participants. Findings from this study help fill the gaps in the literature regarding the unique experiences of immigrants with insecure legal status who have survived torture as they go through the process of seeking asylum.

Keywords: asylum seekers, survivors of torture, mental health, well-being, sociopolitical climate

Mental Health and Well-Being of Survivors of Torture as They Seek Asylum

Amid ongoing war and humanitarian crises around the world, there was an estimated 5.4 million individuals seeking asylum in other countries as of 2022 (UNHCR, 2023). These individuals, particularly those who have survived torture, continue to experience challenges to their mental health and well-being due to their insecure legal status and post-migration stressors. Yet, little is known about the mental health of asylum seekers generally, and how socioecological factors such as the U.S. immigration system and sociopolitical climate influence their well-being. Using a phenomenological approach, this current study aims to better understand how mental health and well-being of six African asylum seekers, who are also survivors of torture, are impacted by post-migration stressors associated with the immigration process. A secondary aim will be to explore perceptions of the current sociopolitical climate in the U.S. and how these subjective views contribute to a sense of well-being as participants go through the process of seeking asylum.

Literature Review

Asylum Seekers and the U.S. Asylum Process

As of 2022, there was an estimated 108.4 million people who had been forcibly displaced (UNHCR, 2023). This total includes individuals who are internally displaced, refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless people. Of that total number, approximately 5.4 million are asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2023). It is likely that these numbers have grown exponentially over the past year due to ongoing war and humanitarian crises, particularly in Gaza, Afghanistan, Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Ukraine, in addition to ongoing violence in the Northern Triangle

(Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador), which have led to the forced migration of millions of people to surrounding countries.

Both asylum seekers and refugees are defined as individuals who have fled their country of origin to another country because their government has failed to protect their human rights, leaving them to be persecuted, and/or fear future persecution due to some aspect of their identity (Baugh, 2020). The official definition of what it means to be a refugee, in addition to the appropriate legal protections and social rights that this group of forced migrants is entitled to, was originally created during the 1951 United Nations (UN) Geneva Convention. This definition was further revised during the creation of the 1967 Protocol which addressed the need to broaden these protections to persecuted individuals globally, and not just individuals from European countries (UNHCR, 2011). According to the Geneva Convention Article 1A,

> A refugee is any person who is outside his or her country of nationality (or, if stateless, outside the country of last habitual residence) and is unable or unwilling to return to that country because of persecution or well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.

Asylum seekers are distinct from other forcibly displaced persons, such as refugees, because although they have fled their country of origin due to persecution and conflict, they are only granted temporary protection in the country that they resettle. Unlike refugees, who apply for refugee status prior to entering the U.S., asylum seekers must apply to obtain the same protections as those that are granted to refugees under the UN convention at the port of entry or once they are already in the U.S (Migration Policy Institute, 2021). Although an asylum seeker can remain in the United States until the final determination on their application has been made, they are not given permission to stay indefinitely until they are granted asylum and obtain secure

legal status as a refugee by an asylum officer or by an immigration court official (Meissner et al., 2018). Being granted asylum can immensely help immigrants in moving forward with their life by creating opportunities to bring immediate family members to the U.S., gain the right to legal employment, access social services, and become U.S. citizens (Meffert et al., 2010).

U.S. Asylum Process. The process in which one seeks asylum within the U.S. is heavily based on the circumstances that led them to entering the country and their duration of time in the country prior to applying for asylum. Someone who is seeking asylum within the U.S. may apply through an affirmative or a defensive process. If an asylum seeker is already living in the U.S. at the time of submitting an application, either due to having a tourist or student visa or another lawful status, or by entering the country without going through all the legal channels and without being detained by immigration authorities, this is considered an affirmative application that is submitted to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) (Meffert et al., 2010; Meissner et al., 2018). Asylum officers are responsible for granting asylum to affirmative cases.

However, if an asylum seeker is denied affirmative asylum, they may opt to apply for asylum defensively through the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) and go to immigration court. This secondary approach to seeking asylum is a means to defend against forced removal from the U.S. after being denied asylum affirmatively (Meissner et al., 2018). One may also apply for asylum defensively if they make a claim for protection due to fear of returning to their home country after crossing the U.S. border. If their claims are accepted, meaning that they passed the credible-fear screening and it was determined that the migrant has a reasonable fear of persecution in their country of origin, they are qualified to submit an asylum claim defensively and plead their case before an immigration judge (Meissner et al., 2018).

Similarly, if a migrant is taken into custody after being denied asylum and told that they will be deported without being seen in immigration court, they may go through a reasonable-fear interview process if they express fear of going back to their country of origin. In this situation, asylum seekers may seek protection under the Convention Against Torture in immigration court (Meissner et al., 2018).

After submitting a claim for asylum, the burden of proving that one is qualified for refugee status is a challenging ordeal because it requires the asylum seeker to navigate the bureaucratic obstacles within a host country's immigration system while dealing with the emotional toll of past and present stress and trauma. This process often requires asylum seekers to demonstrate to an asylum officer or an immigration judge that they are a credible and reliable source of information (Evans & Hass, 2018). They are expected to deliver their testimony and provide an affidavit account of their past persecution and traumatic experiences in a manner that is consistent and plausible. If the asylum seeker's testimony or accounts of their experience are too vague or inconsistent, it is to their benefit to provide additional corroborating physical evidence, accounts from witnesses, or other materials or information that could support claims of exposure to traumatic experiences and persecution in one's country of origin (Evans & Hass, 2018). Gathering additional supporting evidence is often a challenging task, especially given the circumstances that led the asylum seeker to flee their home country.

Examining the Role of Mental Health in the Immigration Court. The process of applying for asylum can be especially distressing to asylum seekers, from the point of submitting an application, up to, and throughout, the process of going through the immigration system and receiving the final determination of one's legal status. Timing in which an asylum seeker applies for asylum is critical. According to the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant

Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), which was passed by Congress in 1996, one must apply for asylum within one year of arrival in the U.S, known as the one-year bar (Musalo & Rice, 2008). Although this policy allows for some flexibility, such as extenuating circumstances that may arise or a change in eligibility in applying for asylum, it leaves little room to excuse delays related to psychological distress. For example, it fails to consider avoidance and sometimes incapacitating levels of psychological distress that may result from exposure to trauma, particularly in individuals who have posttraumatic stress disorder (McVane, 2020). This is important because some asylum seekers may delay submission of their asylum application due to psychological distress, thereby placing them past the one-year bar.

Challenges related to poor mental health and functioning may persist and have a continuous negative impact on asylum seekers as they progress throughout the immigration process. When sharing their testimony and case in court or to an asylum officer, asylum seekers must adequately communicate to the decision-making body that they will face life-threatening circumstances if deported back to their country of origin. Unfortunately, past trauma can impact one's cognitive functioning, particularly the ability to accurately recount details of past stressful experiences, in addition to the emotional burden of sharing one's most distressing moments with immigration officials (McVane, 2020). Exposure to traumatic events early in life has been found to lead to structural changes in the brain, which can negatively impact one's memory (Carrion & Wong, 2012). Furthermore, some individuals with posttraumatic stress disorder may have trouble remembering details in an organized and linear way (McVane, 2020; Brewin, 2011). For these reasons, asylum seekers' accounts of their experiences may have a lot of holes, may not make sense, and may even sound contradictory. They may also share very traumatic experiences with

little to no emotional expressiveness, or even an affect that is incongruent and inappropriate given the details being shared (The Center for Victims of Torture [CVT], 2021).

Although research provides support to contextualize why memories of past traumatic experiences may be distorted or fragmented, asylum seekers are still expected to provide accurate and detailed accounts of past stressful experiences as part of the process of seeking asylum. This task is further complicated by the prolonged wait times that asylum seekers commonly experience as they go through the asylum process. Details of traumatic memories may naturally fade over time, in addition to the dissociative amnesia that is common in those suffering from PTSD. Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect that someone experiencing ongoing severe emotional distress and a history of trauma would be able to accurately recall all central and peripheral details of past traumatic events. Additionally, even if someone is able to recall details of a past traumatic incident, it can be very difficult to divulge details due to feelings of guilt, shame and embarrassment (Meffert et al., 2010). Some types of traumatic experiences can be especially difficult to disclose to an immigration official or in immigration court, such as experiences of sexual violence, which is often associated with dissociation and higher levels of PTSD symptoms and negative feelings, such as shame (Bögner et al., 2007). Feelings of shame are especially common among survivors of torture (Shapiro, 2003).

Support from immigration attorneys can help to address and mitigate the negative effects of psychological distress on an asylum seeker's case. They can be especially beneficial in building a stronger case in support of an asylum seeker’s claims by gathering information and corroborating evidence. For example, they may request a forensic psychological assessment report from forensic evaluators that can help support an asylum seeker’s claim by providing an unbiased perspective on the asylum seeker’s narrative account, credibility, and psychological

functioning (Evans & Hass, 2018). Attorneys can also coach clients on how to tell their personal narrative in a linear, detailed, and concise manner that is consistent with other supporting evidence and documentation. Unfortunately, most immigrants who seek asylum in the U.S. do not have access to an immigration lawyer due to inability to pay for the steep legal fees and limited options in finding attorneys who conduct pro bono work. (Meffert et al., 2010). There is a need for more research on the impact of legal representation on asylum seekers, particularly in relation to mental health outcomes during the process of applying for asylum.

Prolonged Insecure Legal Status Due to Backlog in Claims Processing

The asylum process can span across years, leaving asylum seekers in an extended time of uncertainty of their future legal status and ability to stay in a host country while simultaneously fearing deportation and repatriation. Over the past few years, particularly since 2010, there has been a noticeable increase in asylum claims, particularly for affirmative and credible fear claims in the U.S., which has led to a severe backlog in processing asylum claims. This sharp increase is partially attributed to the increase in violence and migration out of Central America's Northern Triangle region, consisting of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, along with asylum seekers from Venezuela who have been residing in the U.S. and are now submitting claims to remain in the country (Meissner et al., 2018). There has also been an increase in unaccompanied minors crossing into the U.S. through the Southern border. In a Migration Policy Institute report on the asylum system, Meissner et al. (2018) noted that "The number of affirmative asylum requests filed annually has increased from 28,000 in fiscal year (FY) 2010 to 143,000 in FY 2017, resulting in a backlog of 320,000 pending cases as of the end of June 2018;" and also noted that "credible-fear claims at the border have also risen, from 9,000 in FY 2010 to 79,000 in FY

2017," and "defensive asylum requests are about 30 percent of the record 746,000 cases of all types pending" (Meissner et al., 2018, p. 2).

According to statutory requirements, initial review of asylum claims should be processed within 180 days of submission. However, many asylum seekers have had to wait between two to five years for adjudication of their claims (Meissner et al., 2018). Individuals who apply for asylum and do not receive a final deliberation within 180 days may be granted authorization to work. However, this severe backlog has led to other major issues, particularly for asylum seekers who are left in a prolonged state of limbo in which they are not entitled to the same protections as refugees, such as access to social services.

In an attempt to address the growing backlog of asylum claims, the Trump administration implemented several initiatives, such as reenacting the "last-in, first-out" policy in January 2018, putting limits on asylum hearings in March 2018, creating the Interview Waiver Pilot Program which was in effect between late 2017 and August 2018, and hiring more asylum officers in 2019 (Pierce & Bolter, 2020). Many of these policies, such as Prompt Asylum Case Review (PACR) and Humanitarian Asylum Review Process (HARP) directly impact immigrants from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Although some of these policies, such as the "last-in, first-out" processing policy - which prioritizes the applications that have been filed most recently to ensure that final determinations are made within six months - have helped alleviate the overwhelming backlog of claims, this approach also leaves asylum seekers who have been awaiting final deliberation to wait an even longer time for court dates and final deliberations on their claims (Meissner et al., 2018).

In addition to the last-in, first-out policy, the Trump administration enacted other policies and laws regarding the U.S. immigration system. Trump's presidential platform, and its heavy

anti-immigration sentiment, combined with the COVID-19 Coronavirus pandemic, led to changes made in the name of protecting the physical safety of American citizens and the U.S. economy. For example, Title 42 enabled Border Patrol agents to turn away migrants at the border to prevent the spread of Covid-19 and other contagious diseases (Pew Research Center, 2022). Of the over 400 immigration policy changes that were swiftly put into place, many of them have had a direct negative impact on asylum seekers, particularly those coming from the Southern border (Pierce & Bolter, 2020).

Stress, Trauma and Other Predictors of Mental Health Outcomes

Exposure to stressful and traumatic experiences that occurred in one's country of origin, along the migration journey, and post-migration all impact mental health of asylum seekers (Bemak & Chung, 2017). Asylum seekers are often exposed to stressful and traumatic experiences that surpass that of the general population and other immigrant populations who are not forced to migrate, and which place asylum seekers at higher risk for psychological distress and disorders, including depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (Knipscheer et al., 2015) and anxiety (Silove et al., 1997).

Exposure to Stress and Trauma Before, During, and After Migration. Much like other displaced persons, asylum seekers are often forced to flee their country of origin due to denial of basic human rights; genocide; torture; physical and sexual abuse; community violence and warfare; persecution based on specific identities, such as religion, sexual orientation, and ethnic background; and torture (Steel et al., 2009). It is important to consider exposure to stressful and traumatic experiences that occurred in one's country of origin when examining potential risk for psychopathology. In a study exploring pre-migration and post-migration predictors of posttraumatic stress disorder for survivors of political violence, Chu et al. (2012)

found that specific pre-migration stressors, such as sexual assault, were significantly associated with worse PTSD outcomes.

The process of migrating to another country to seek asylum is often filled with potentially dangerous situations. Many asylum seekers, and other displaced persons, are often forced to seek temporary or long-term shelter in camps or cities that are ill-equipped to provide even the most basic needs (Bemak & Chung, 2017). In addition to extreme living conditions, there is also the potential for continued sexual and physical violence, persecution, and lack of access to food, clean water, and other necessities (2017).

In addition to dealing with post-migration stressors that are common for migrant populations, such as adjusting to the local culture and language, discrimination, difficulty with transportation and finding work and housing, lack of money, asylum seekers face additional stressors that are specific to their insecure legal status, including the asylum backlog, immigration court proceedings, detention, inability to plan for the future, not being able to find legal employment, delayed work permits, lack of access to social services, loneliness, boredom, separation from loved ones, fear of family's safety back home, loss of identity and purpose, difficulties with navigating the immigration system, fearing deportation, restricted movement, feelings of inadequacy and isolation, needing to conceal one's identity as a foreigner to avoid xenophobic violence, and feelings of hopelessness (Bracken & Gorst-Unsworth, 1991; Center for Victims of Torture [CVT], 2021; Jannesari et al., 2022; Tewolde, 2021). Other factors, such as whether one has legal representation and length of time in the host country, are also important determinants of mental health outcomes among asylum seekers. Laban et al. (2004) found that Iraqi asylum seekers who had been living in the Netherlands for longer than two years had higher prevalence rates of depression, somatoform, and anxiety disorders compared to those in the

country for less than six months. Jannesari et al. (2020) found that these post-migration stressors (i.e., lack of ability to plan for one's future, living in a socially threatening, oppressive, and confusing environment created by immigration bureaucracy and the asylum process, inability to work, isolation, feeling dehumanized, a lack of a safe space, and retraumatization), in addition to experiences of discrimination in the postmigration environment, were important factors in influencing mental health outcomes of asylum seekers.

Some asylum seekers are at even higher risk of exposure to certain post-migration stressors based on their intersecting marginalized identities. For example, compared to their male counterparts, female asylum seekers are more likely to experience sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) at all parts of their migration journey, including during the post-resettlement phase (Gebreyesus, 2019; Wenzel et al., 2004). In a large-scale community-based participatory interview study conducted with asylum seekers, refugees, and undocumented migrants who were living in the Netherlands and Belgium, Keygnaert et al. (2012) found that out an average of approximately 1.5 instances of personal or peer SGBV victimization were reported by participants. Although the majority of the perpetrators were identified as past partners, one-fifth of the reported instances of SGBV were perpetrated by professionals working with participants in the asylum process (reception center staff, police and security guards, and lawyers) and one-third of the perpetrators were Dutch or Belgian nationals (Keygnaert et al., 2012). Participants also elaborated on the many negative consequences that resulted from instances of SGBV, including psychological distress, socio-economic concerns, physical consequences, and sexual and reproductive consequences (Keygnaert et al., 2012).

Findings from a narrative analysis conducted by Jannesari et al. (2022) with asylum seekers in the United Kingdom highlight the ways in which conceptualizations of post-migration

stressors are often heavily intertwined with the traumas experienced in pre-migration. Themes gathered from the narrative analysis emphasize the traumatic and dehumanizing nature of being asked repeatedly to share one's past traumatic experiences, while simultaneously having one's story questioned for authenticity and worthiness of being granted legal status, all while being denied access to social services and respect given to citizens (Jannesari et al., 2022). Jannesari et al. (2022) described the general sense of aimlessness and lack of purpose and identity that many participants shared as they waited for final determination about their asylum application.

Mental Health and Insecure Legal Status. Lack of legal, or resident, status is a potential risk factor for poor mental health. Immigrants who lack secure legal immigration status, such as asylum seekers, present with higher rates of psychological distress and psychopathology than refugees, and other displaced populations, such as internally displaced persons (Gerritsen et al., 2006; Leiler et al., 2019). Unlike immigrants who migrated for economic reasons, or individuals who have been granted refugee status, asylum seekers experience additional post-migration stressors that are unique to immigrants with insecure legal status. For example, asylum seekers may experience higher levels of uncertainty about the future, feelings of hopelessness, fear of a rejected asylum claim and subsequent deportation, difficulty finding legal employment opportunities, and frustration with the bureaucracy surrounding the asylum process. In a study comparing mental and physical health outcomes between refugees and asylum seekers from Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iran, Gerritsen et al. (2006) found that asylum seekers reported higher rates of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and physical health concerns. Additionally, in a study exploring the impact of legal status on the emotional well-being of undocumented Latino immigrants, Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2007) found that fears of deportation put participants at higher risk for emotional distress and underutilization of health services.

Compared to refugees and other migrants who have been provided with permission for extended or indefinite stay in their host country, asylum seekers must await final deliberation on their legal status once they apply for asylum. Not knowing whether one will be able to remain in the country of asylum or be deported back to their home country makes it difficult to be able to plan and look ahead to the future, often leading to increased feelings of distress (Jannesari et al., 2020). In a study exploring PTSD symptoms, negative beliefs, posttraumatic growth and social connectedness differences among Muslim asylum seekers, refugees, and internally displaced persons (IDPs), Dolezal et al. (2021) found that although asylum seekers reported less PTSD symptoms than their refugee counterparts, there was a stronger relationship between their negative beliefs about themselves, others and the world (posttraumatic cognitions) and their social connectedness (Dolezal et al., 2021). Gaining secure immigration status can make a notable positive impact on the mental health of asylum seekers (Raghavan et al., 2013).

The length of time spent waiting for final determination of legal status has been shown to be an important factor in predicting mental health outcomes within this population. Ryan et al. (2009) found that asylum seekers who were awaiting final determination in a Western country for at least two years had higher rates of depression and anxiety, when compared to asylum seekers who were seeking asylum in a Western country and arrived within the past six months (Ryan et al., 2009). Similarly, Laban et al. (2004) found that prevalence rates of mood disorders, including anxiety, depressive, and somatoform disorders, but not PTSD, were significantly higher for the Iraqi asylum seekers that were living in the Netherlands awaiting the final determination on their asylum application for at least 2 years, when compared to the group of Iraqi asylum seekers who had been waiting for less than 6 months. They highlighted that the pattern of increased psychopathology that was seen in asylum seekers with insecure legal status

for a prolonged period of several years was likely due to the compounding effect of having several post migration stressors that are common for asylum seekers, such as fear of deportation, concern about loved ones, lack of access to adequate housing, and financial constraints (Laban et al., 2004). When assessing asylum seekers in Australia for PTSD, Silove et al. (1997) found that delays in processing refugee applications was associated with higher rates of PTSD (Silove et al., 1997). Silove et al. (1993) highlighted the potentially retraumatizing nature of extended wait time of final determination of refugee status, particularly for asylum seekers who are detained for more than three years. They note that this continuum of trauma can be especially traumatic due to the culmination of disrupted social networks, exhaustion of having one's life threatened, and fateful loss (Silove et al., 1993).

Distress resulting from prolonged uncertainty about legal status may be further exacerbated by other factors such as feelings of hopelessness, a lack of a sense of purpose and belongingness, difficulty navigating the immigration system, placement in a detention facility, prolonged separation from loved ones and broader community support systems, inability to find legal employment opportunity, challenges around accessing local resources, and difficulty finding legal representation from an immigration attorney (Procter et al., 2017). Exacerbation of psychological distress and retraumatization is often related to additional factors such as placement in detention facilities, prolonged time spent in host country while awaiting court dates for immigration court, and lack of legal representation from an immigration attorney (Ryan et al., 2009; Bracken & Gorst-Unsworth, 1991; Laban et al., 2004, Sourander, 2003).

Impact of Sociopolitical Climate on Asylum Seekers

Immigration laws and policies often reflect the status of the country with respect to its economy, international relations, current administration and politics, and societal beliefs and

values around multiculturalism and immigrants. These belief systems are often heavily influenced and driven by xenophobic and racist fears, perceived scarcity of resources, and in-group versus outgroup mentality. The current state of the U.S. can be characterized by political polarization, a rise in white nationalism (particularly with the previous Trump administration), and anti-immigrant sentiment. These factors, along with a long history of systemic oppression and violence directed towards Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, all contribute to the overall sociopolitical climate of the U.S. and may have a significant impact on asylum seekers who identify as a person of color. The stress of going through the immigration system may be further exacerbated by having multiple intersecting marginalized identities of being a person of color and being an immigrant, particularly for asylum seekers of the Black diaspora.

The violence and hostility resulting from anti-immigrant sentiments can have a notably negative impact on asylum seeking populations. In a systematic review, da Silva Rebelo et al. (2018) examined the impact of a hostile host society on asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants. They found that when there are sentiments of mistrust, hostility and discrimination directed at these populations, there are clear negative impacts on the biopsychosocial well-being of asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants (da Silva Rebelo et al., 2018). Specifically, they found that hostility from host countries often leads to feelings of anger, frustration, mistrust, and helplessness, and this in turn, has a negative impact on immigrants seeking out needed resources, such as social and health services (da Silva Rebelo et al., 2018).

McDermott and Ainslie (2021) highlight the impact of exposure to trauma and violence in the home country across different periods of migration and resettlement for forced migrants from Mexico and Central America: premigration, while migrating, as they arrive in the U.S., and

the inherent institutionalized violence that is deeply integrated within the U.S. immigration system. The researchers found that the impact of negative immigrant sentiment was especially troubling and concerning for asylum seekers from Mexico and Central America who lack legal status and were forced to endure the systemic violence and imposed criminalization of being watched, forced to recount their experiences repeatedly and awaiting final deliberation on their legal status, often for prolonged periods of time while simultaneously fearing possible deportation. Participants shared personal experiences of escaping violence and seeking refuge, only to be exposed to institutionalized violence in the U.S. during the asylum application process (McDermott & Ainslie, 2021).

The weight of increased hate crimes, violence, and anti-minority and anti-immigrant rhetoric falls heavy on communities of color within the U.S. Citing from a 2018 report by Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino, Campbell et al. (2018) highlighted the increase in anti-Latinx hate crimes, particularly since the beginning of the Trump administration in 2016 (Campbell et. al., 2018). Despite the rise in racially targeted hate crimes against Latinx individuals, fear of involvement with authority and risks of potential deportation have prevented many individuals from reporting cases of overt physical and verbal violence (Campbell et al., 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic also led to a notable increase in discrimination, verbal and physical violence, and other hate crimes committed against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders that stemmed from both racism and xenophobia (Gover, Harper & Langdon, 2020).

The current sociopolitical climate, in conjunction with the impact of post-migration stressors, can be especially stressful for Black migrants coming from countries in Africa and the Caribbean. As of 2022, the Pew Research Center reported that, "Roughly 4.6 million, or one-in-

ten, Black people in the U.S. were born in a different country as of 2019, up from 3% in 1980" (Pew Research Center, 2022, p.7). Of the foreign-born Black population in the U.S., a majority of people are coming from Caribbean islands, particularly Jamica and Haiti (Pew Research Center, 2022). However, Black immigrants coming from African countries are accounting for a bulk of the upward growth patterns seen in census data since 2000 (Pew Research Center, 2022).

To better understand the unique experience of Black immigrants, it is critical to examine experiences of this population through the lens of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). During a time of increased attention around anti-Black sentiment in the U.S., Black immigrants may experience further marginalization due to their racial and ethnic background, in addition to their immigration status. In a photovoice qualitative study conducted with Congolese refugee women who had resettled in the U.S., Saksena (2021) found that participants shared concerns centered on discrimination, as well as fear of police and raising children in the U.S. Additionally, Ellis et al. (2010) found that Somali refugee adolescents' mental health outcomes, including PTSD and depressive symptoms, were associated with perceived discrimination, with this relationship being moderated by acculturation and gender. More research is needed to better understand the impact of a hostile sociopolitical climate of a host country on Black asylees, particularly those who have survived torture.

Asylum Seekers who are Survivors of Torture: Special Needs and Considerations

Asylum seekers and other forced migrants who are survivors of torture have an additional layer of complex trauma that should be taken into consideration. The official internationally agreed upon definition of torture, as stated in article 1 of the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984) defines torture as,

> Any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions (p. 1).

According to Kira (2002), torture can be characterized by its unpredictable, uncontrollable, and inescapable nature. Torture can be conceptualized as a cumulative and complex trauma because it can include many different forms of violence over various occasions for an undermined amount of time which can lead to many negative outcomes on the individual level, such as feelings of mental defeat and isolation, and a change in the way one sees themselves, others, and the world around them (Kira, 2002; Ehlers, Maercker & Boos, 2000).

In their systematic review and meta-analysis of the prevalence rates of mental health disorders, particularly depression and PTSD, Steel et al. (2009) found that increased rates of depression and PTSD were accounted for by past exposure to torture. In addition to past torture experiences, and similar to other forced migrants, legal status and post-migration factors also impact mental health for survivors of torture. In a study examining predictors of PTSD, depression, and anxiety in a sample of survivors of torture living in the United States, Tran et al. (2020) found that legal status and other post-migration factors, in addition to demographic factors such as gender, were related to worse mental health outcomes.

Although past findings provided more information on the impact of torture on the mental health of asylum seekers, there is a lack of literature exploring how resettlement in a hostile sociopolitical environment may impact the mental health of asylum seekers who are also survivors of torture. Furthermore, little is known about the experiences of survivors of torture who fled countries in Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America and identify as Black. In addition to anti-immigration and xenophobic sentiments, survivors of torture coming from these countries may find instances of violence against Black individuals, particularly highly publicized instances of violence that are perpetrated by figures of authority, including police officers, to be especially upsetting and possibly even retraumatizing. It is important to understand the unique experiences of asylum seekers who are survivors of torture and are coming from countries within Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America, as their marginalized intersecting identities, in addition to past exposure to torture and insecure legal status, may put them at even higher risk for distress and psychopathology.

Theoretical Framework to Conceptualize the Psychological Experiences of Asylum Seekers

Ecological Systems Theory. When addressing the unique needs of this population, it helps to examine experiences and necessary interventions using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System (1977) to understand how asylum seekers' sense of well-being may be heavily influenced and shaped by their interactions with different agents within the various levels of their ecological system. Bronfenbrenner's model was originally developed to understand how a child's development is shaped by interactions with others in the different levels of their ecological system, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and the chronosystem. However, this same model can be useful in exploring how an asylum seeker's experience is shaped by the bidirectional interactions within their ecological system. This model

is especially relevant with this population, given that so much of their experience may be influenced and dependent on their interactions with agents within their microsystem (family, attorney, friends, health care providers), their exosystem (any experiences with social services and the health care system, the immigration system, community members, mass media), mesosystems (bidirectional interactions between the exosystem and the microsystem), and the macrosystem (larger attitudes, values, beliefs, and sociopolitical climate of the host society).

Asylum seekers’ daily experiences and their future depend on their interaction with agents within their broader ecological system. Therefore, it is critical to look at contextual and environmental factors when understanding mental health outcomes and sense of well-being within this population. Furthermore, interactions within their broader ecological system, particularly the macrosystem, can have a significant impact on one’s sense of self and belonging. These theoretical frameworks can help understand the complex and nuanced experiences of asylum seekers.

Gaps in the Literature

Given the nature of the asylum process, particularly the limited social supports and networks, lack of access to social services and opportunities to improve socioeconomic status, exposure to ongoing stressors and trauma, the process of seeking asylum can be perceived as ongoing violence for migrants attempting to navigate the asylum process (Keygnaert et al., 2012). Although there is extensive research on the negative effects of past and present stress and trauma on the mental health of asylum seekers, further research is needed to understand the impact of going through the immigration process on asylum seekers who are also survivors of torture. Past studies have shown that this vulnerable population is at especially high risk for psychopathology, particularly PTSD, depression and anxiety; however, additional research is

needed to understand how factors such as legal status, prolonged court delays, interactions with lawyers, and other aspects of the immigration process, in addition to the general sociopolitical climate in the U.S. is impacting the well-being of survivors of torture who lack secure legal status.

Furthermore, although some literature has highlighted the negative impact of prolonged court proceedings and awaiting the final determination of legal status on mental health outcomes of asylum seekers, no other known qualitative study has used semi-structured interviewing to examine the impact of these post-migration stressors among survivors of torture who have applied for asylum. Additionally, no other known study has explored the experiences of asylum seekers who are receiving additional support and services through a community center that serves survivors of torture and other immigrant and refugee populations. There is also a lack of literature that is focused on the perspectives of survivors of torture that are coming from countries in Africa. Although theories have been used to understand how anti-immigrant attitudes and sentiment can negatively affect asylum seekers, no study has used Bronfenbrenner's ecological model to understand the experiences of survivors of torture as they seek asylum.

Current Study

There is a lack of literature providing insight into the lived experiences of asylum seekers who have survived torture. Furthermore, there are also limited spaces for African-born asylum seekers to share their narratives of what it is like to seek asylum within the United States. This current study is attempting to fill these gaps in the literature by using semi-structured interviews to understand the unique perspectives of survivors of torture who are coming from African countries, who have applied for asylum and have received services from the Marjorie Kovler

Center for Survivors of Torture (hereinafter referred to as "Kovler"). Specifically, this study aims to better understand how mental health and well-being of immigrants with insecure legal status (i.e., asylum seekers) and who have survived torture are impacted by the immigration process. A secondary aim will be to explore perceptions of the current sociopolitical climate in the U.S. and how these subjective views contribute to a sense of well-being as immigrants go through the process of seeking asylum.

I conducted a qualitative study using an interpretative/constructive epistemological perspective to better understand the experiences of asylum seekers from their worldview (Merriam, 2009). This study was conducted using a phenomenological approach (Marton, 1981) to explore the experiences of survivors of torture who lack secure legal status, and those who were recently granted asylum. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory as a guiding framework, I explored how participants' sense of well-being is influenced by the larger context of their socioecological environment, including the immigration system and the sociopolitical climate of the U.S., as they seek asylum.

Method

Researcher Positionality

I identify as a Black, U.S. born, second-generation immigrant of Haitian descent, cis-gendered woman, who is a doctoral candidate in a clinical-community program at a private university in Chicago, Illinois. I have spent the duration of my graduate studies focused on research related to immigrant and refugee mental health, community-based research and interventions, and culturally responsive and adapted treatment. Although I do not have personal experiences with insecure legal status, my familiarity and interest in exploring this research topic

is partially driven by my own positionality of having both parents and extended family who have emigrated to the U.S.

My decision to examine the experiences of asylum seekers from a socioecological lens, is influenced by my training in both clinical and community psychology. Mental health is impacted by the complex bidirectional interactions between internal and environmental forces. My past clinical, research and community-engaged work with local refugee communities, along with experiences of conducting forensic asylum evaluations, have helped me better understand the unique stressors of forcibly displaced migrant populations. Furthermore, my year-long training as a student therapist at Kovler informed my understanding of the complex mental, physical, legal, occupational, and social service-based needs of adult survivors of torture – many of whom were also asylum seekers. Interacting with an interdisciplinary team of social workers, case managers, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, and occupational therapists highlighted the need for wrap–around services, particularly for this population. Collectively, these supports provide clients with an opportunity to establish a sense of safety while building community. Similarly, my current predoctoral internship training has reiterated the need to use a socioecological lens when working with veterans. By connecting to the veterans affairs hospital system, veterans can holistically seek treatment for psychological distress by addressing their basic needs through social, mental, and physical services provided by the VA.

Collectively, my lived professional and personal experiences motivated me to explore the lived experiences of asylum seekers who have survived torture as they progress through the U.S. immigration system from a socioecological framework. This research question was developed with the intention of using the results to help inform future clinical practice and the development of additional research questions.

Setting

This study was conducted in the city of Chicago, a large Midwestern city that is home to many foreign-born populations. As a whole, Chicago is also much more left leaning than neighboring Midwestern communities and the larger state of Illinois, a factor that may have influence on certain policies and overall attitude towards immigrant populations (WBEZ, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2022). Chicago has historically been very welcoming to immigrant newcomers and is a sanctuary city, meaning that individuals who are undocumented are more likely to be protected against deportation and prosecution (Huang & Liu, 2018). Many of the neighborhoods within the city are known to be cultural enclaves for specific communities of various ethnic backgrounds.

This study was conducted in partnership with Kovler, a center that is housed within a larger Chicago-based organization, Heartland Alliance International, through their Survivors of Torture Program. This partnership consisted of collaboration of study design and research questions, consultation on the interview protocol and recruitment materials, and assistance with recruitment of participants and interpreters. Before developing this study, the researcher met with Dr. Martin Hill, associate director of research and evaluation at Kovler, to discuss research areas that would best serve the center's needs. Data collected through ongoing program evaluation at Kovler, in addition to Dr. Hill’s observations and informal discussions with clients, highlighted the need for further research on clients’ experiences of navigating the immigration system. Specifically, Dr. Hill noted that qualitative data collection could help contextualize some of the quantitative data findings from the program evaluation data. In addition to contributing to the broader literature on the experiences of asylum seekers and survivors of torture, the goal of conducting this study is to share the thematic findings with Kovler staff to provide information

about the unique experiences and perspectives of the clients served at Kovler. Findings from this study may be especially helpful for new staff and trainees who may have less experience working with this population prior to working at Kovler.

The Majorie Kovler Center provides wrap-around services, including legal assistance; mental and physical healthcare; assistance with food, housing, and employment; and other social services. They serve various marginalized populations including asylees, refugees, and other individuals who have been forcibly displaced and victims of human trafficking. Although the Kovler Center has clientele from more than sixty countries within Africa, Europe, Asia, the Americas, and the Middle East, approximately 75% of clientele emigrated from countries in Africa as of 2019 (Hill, 2019). Staff and trained volunteers utilize a strength-based approach to provide trauma-informed, holistic care. Service providers work with clientele using Herman's (1992) three stages of recovery model for individuals who have been exposed to trauma: 1) establishment of safety, 2) remembrance and mourning, 3) reconnection. The center has several programs, including the Survivors of Torture Program, which serves adult survivors of torture, the Child Trauma Program, and the Family Program. All study participants were recruited through the center's Survivors of Torture Program.

Given the study aimed to understand the experiences of asylum seekers, particularly within the current sociopolitical climate and regarding their interactions with the legal system, and other environmental factors, that participants receive or have received services from Kovler and that they live in Chicago is especially noteworthy. These contextual factors have likely shaped the experiences of participants. As a population that is often underserved and suffer from distress related to acculturation and resettlement stress such as a loss of a sense of community, inability to access mental, physical, legal, and social services, living in Chicago - a diverse

metropolis that has many immigrant communities - and obtaining services from the Kovler Center may be especially advantageous to participants. Participants may have a unique experience given these contextual and environmental factors when compared to asylum seekers who resettle in other parts of the country.

Participants

To answer the research questions, a very specific population were enrolled in the study using purposeful sampling techniques. Study inclusion criteria included individuals who: 1) have applied for asylum, 2) are a survivor of torture and 3) are between the ages of 18 and 64, and 4) would feel comfortable with completing the interview in English or in French, Spanish or Arabic, with the assistance of an interpreter. With the intention of learning more about diverse lived experiences from individuals who fall within this subpopulation, individuals who had applied for asylum but were still waiting for their final determination (lack secure legal status) and participants who applied for asylum and were granted asylum (secure legal status) were recruited for the study. The final sample included six individuals, whose sociodemographic and immigration information is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

ID	Age	Gender	Relationship Status	Region of Africa Participant is from	Language Spoken During Interview	Legal Status	Years in the U.S. (> or < 2 years)
1	37	Man	Single	Western Africa	French	Insecure – applied for asylum	< 2 years
2	24	Woman	Partnered – living with	Western Africa	French	Insecure – applied	< 2 years

			partner and child			for asylum	
3	39	Man	Single	Unknown Region in Africa	English	Insecure – applied for asylum; appealing a denied request	> 2 years
4	37	Man	Married – wife and child in COO	Western Africa	French	Insecure – applied for asylum	< 2 years
5	39	Man	Single - child in COO	Western Africa	French	Secure – granted asylum	> 2 years
6	44	Man	Married & living with 1 child; wife and other children in COO	Western Africa	French	Insecure – applied for asylum; appealing a denied request	> 2 years

Sampling Approach

A homogenous sample of participants were recruited for this study. This is a recommended approach to sampling when conducting an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Robinson, 2014). Because the study goal was to learn more about the unique experiences of a specific population, individuals who are both survivors of torture and have gone through the asylum process were primarily recruited for life history homogeneity. Participants were recruited from Kovler for geographical homogeneity. This purposeful sampling approach was the most appropriate way to answer the research questions, rather than using other techniques, such as random or convenience sampling (Robinson, 2014; Marshall, 1996).

Although there is a lack of consensus in the literature regarding the ideal sample size for qualitative studies, this study initially aimed to recruit 10 participants. Throughout the data collection process, an organic sampling approach (Mason, 2002; Robinson, 2014) was taken by being flexible when it came to final sample size. The decision to stop recruitment after completing the sixth interview was guided both by information provided by participants (i.e., data saturation) and by more practical factors (i.e., difficulty in recruiting within a very specific population, working within the confines of a doctoral programmatic timeline, and limited availability and funding needed to pay for interpretation services and schedule interviews with participants) (Silverman, 2010; Robinson, 2014).

Although there were some varied lived experiences in applying for asylum, there was sufficient overlap among the six participants who were enrolled in the study to conclude that data saturation had been achieved (Marshall, 1996). Furthermore, with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, there is more flexibility and allowance for smaller sample sizes due to the level of in-depth analyses required. Collectively, these factors supported the rationale to conclude data collection at six participants.

Recruitment

All recruitment materials were pre-approved by both the Institutional Review Board at DePaul University and by Kovler prior to recruiting participants. Recruitment materials were available in English, French, and Arabic. This decision was made after consulting with the community partner, Dr. Hill, about demographic makeup and languages spoken by clients. He noted that approximately 75% of the clientele served at Kovler are coming from African countries, and the language spoken most often outside of English is French, followed by Arabic.

Recruitment efforts spanned from November 2022 until August 2023. In order to enroll participants, flyers were posted around Kovler, the researcher attended several social events at Kovler to discuss the study with clients and staff, study recruitment emails were sent through the center's email listserv, and verbal information was shared regarding the study while meeting with other trainees and staff at the center. Given the researcher's dual roles as a researcher and as a therapist within Kovler, it was especially important to be mindful of potential ethical issues that may arise in situations where one holds multiple roles. For example, the researcher was very intentional about only sharing information about the study with Kovler staff and during community events, but she did not disclose information regarding the study with her psychotherapy clients.

Due to difficulties in recruiting for a very specific population, inclusion criteria were expanded for the study to account for anyone who met criteria as an adult asylum seeker who had survived torture and was amendable to doing the interview in English, French, Spanish, or Arabic, even if they had not received services from Kovler. The Kovler partner was also consulted to brainstorm additional recruitment methods. He identified clients who might be interested in participating in the study. The researcher called the identified individuals, shared details about the study, addressed questions about the study, screened for eligibility, and then scheduled an appointment with those who expressed interest in participating in the study.

Particularly when working with individuals from historically marginalized groups and minoritized racial and ethnic groups, it is important to form trusting relationships and build rapport within the community that one hopes to recruit from (Rooney et al., 2011). For this reason, and to better understand the context of the community center, the researcher spent time at Kovler outside of required time at the center as a therapist. This allowed for more opportunities

for clients of the center to become more familiar with the researcher and the research being conducted in partnership with Kovler. To further incentivize the study, and to be mindful of the time commitment and effort taken to participate in the study, participants were compensated with a $20 Aldi gift card for their time (Rooney et al., 2011).

During the initial contact with participants, mainly through the phone and email, details were provided about the study's purpose, inclusion criteria, what participation would entail, and the incentive for participation. Potential participants were assessed for eligibility using the inclusion screener questions, and if eligible, they were asked if they would like to participate in a one-on-one interview. For individuals who expressed interest in participation, in addition to inquiring about modality (in person at Kovler versus virtual Zoom interview), language, and interpreter preferences, the researcher also answered questions regarding the interview. Depending on their documented English language proficiency, screener calls were conducted with the assistance of a French-speaking interpreter.

Materials

Interview Protocol

The first section of the semi-structured interviews (see Figure 2 in appendix) covered basic socio-demographic information, such as age and marital status. Close-ended questions such as, “What is your country of origin?” and “What languages do you speak?” were asked. The second section included open-ended semi-structured questions around the process of applying for asylum. Questions in this section included items such as, “What has the process of applying for asylum been like for you?” and “Do you have any specific concerns related to your asylum application or upcoming court date?” Additional follow-up probing questions were asked in an

iterative manner based on responses that participants provided during interviews and throughout data collection.

Procedure

After scheduling a date, time, and location, participants completed one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Five of the six interviews were conducted over password-protected Zoom virtual software, and one interview was conducted in-person at the community center in a private office space. All but one interview was conducted with the assistance of a French language interpreter. Five of the six interviews were recorded for quality assurance purposes during the transcript verification process. One participant did not give his consent to be video or audio recorded for the study.

At the beginning of the research study appointment, the researcher, participant, and interpreter reviewed the contents of the consent form out loud while participants followed along with a visual copy of the consent form presented on the screen of the Zoom video call. The participant who was interviewed in person was provided with a hard copy of the French translated consent form to follow along. Participants were given an opportunity to ask questions or voice concerns while reviewing the consent form. Recording of interviews began after providing consent and after a verbal reminder that the interview was now being recorded and that participants could request to stop recording at any point.

The semi-structured format of the interview allowed for flexibility in asking follow-up questions depending on participants' responses to the interview protocol questions. To avoid overburdening participants, interviews did not exceed 90 minutes. Although the interpreter was instructed to translate word-for-word, it was understood that it may not be possible to translate

some words, phrases, and concepts across languages and cultures. The researcher and interpreter met briefly following each interview to debrief. These post-interview debriefing sessions helped ensure that the researcher understood the nuances in some of the content that may have been difficult to interpret. It also allowed for time to process the content and any emotional distress that the interpreter may be experiencing in response to participants' responses. After the interviews were completed, participants were thanked for their time and compensated with a $20 gift card to Aldi's, a local grocery store chain.

Transcriptions of the Zoom recordings were reviewed by the researcher after interviews and debriefing meetings with the interpreter. All recordings, transcriptions, and study materials were de-identified and stored securely on the researcher's laptop within a secure university-based file storage system. Video files were destroyed after transcriptions were verified.

Interpreter

The interpreter who assisted with French interpretation of five of the six interviews was recruited through Kovler. She identifies as a White American cisgender female who is bilingual in English and French. She previously lived and worked in France and has experience working with asylum seekers who have survived torture as a previous French interpreter volunteer at Kovler. Her experience in French interpretation, particularly with participants who speak French with West and Central African French dialects, was especially helpful given that all five of the French-speaking participants were originally from Togo, Cameroon, or Chad. The interpreter received specialized training from the researcher before helping with interpretation for the study interviews. In this training, the researcher reviewed contextual background and rationale for the study, trauma-informed approaches to interviewing sensitive populations, expectations around interpreting in a research setting, the need for verbatim translation when possible, and the

importance of maintaining participant confidentiality. The interpreter also signed a confidentiality statement provided by the Institutional Review Board to ensure participants' privacy by not sharing content from the interview with anyone outside of the research team.

Due to the content shared during the interviews, debriefing sessions were conducted after the interviews. Because providing interpretation services could potentially have a strong emotional impact on interpreters (Fennig & Denov, 2021), particularly within the context of this study, debriefing sessions were conducted immediately after each interview. Debriefing allowed for time to process the content of the interviews and how the interpreter was feeling in response to topics discussed. This process also provided a chance to confirm and clarify responses from the participant during the interview. The interpreter was compensated for her time spent training, assisting with recruitment screener calls, verifying the accuracy of the French translated recruitment materials and interview protocol, and interpreting during study interviews.

Analysis

This qualitative study was conducted using an interpretative/constructive epistemological lens with the intention of gaining a better understanding of the perspective and experiences of participants from their worldview (Merriam, 2009). Specifically, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used as the qualitative methodology to explore the lived experiences of asylum seekers who are also survivors of torture within the context of going through the immigration system.

Phenomenology is the study of human phenomena through the unique perspectives of individuals and their lived experiences (Demuth & Mey, 2015). It originated as a philosophical-based field of study by Heidegger and his predecessor, Husserl (Reiners, 2012). Both Husserl

and Heidegger emphasized different approaches to examining the lived experiences of others. Qualitative studies conducted using Husserl's descriptive approach to phenomenological research aim to understand lived experiences of participants through descriptive content gathered during data collection. The descriptive approach also aims to limit preconceived notions and biases from researchers and research assistants who are collecting and analyzing data (Reiners, 2012). Research conducted using Heidegger's interpretative phenomenological approach also aims to gather descriptive data from participants, but the intention is to go a step further and make meaning of the phenomenon and experiences that participants are describing (Reiners, 2012). This approach encourages participants to explore how they are conceptualizing their experiences. Furthermore, interpretative phenomenological research also recognizes that the researcher becomes a player within the phenomenon while engaging with the participant through the research process. Thus, there is an understanding that the researcher's preconceived ideas of the phenomenon at hand may play a role in interactions with participants, as well as the analyses of the data collected (Reiners, 2012).

Because this study's research question is not just centered on learning about asylum seekers' experiences of seeking asylum, but also on understanding their interpretations of the experience and the subsequent impact on their mental well-being, this study was conducted using Heidegger's interpretive philosophy approach. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to explore asylum seekers' experiences by collecting data about said experiences using semi-structured interviews, and posing questions in a manner that allows for a deeper sense of the perceptions and interpretations that participants are making of their experiences within the broader context of their environment and the situation (Larkin et al., 2006). Specifically, open-ended questions were asked to obtain descriptive information and personal narratives of the

asylum-seeking process. Further probing was used to understand how participants have been making sense of their experiences as they go through the process within the larger context of their socio-ecological environment (e.g., how are they viewing their future and their legal status within the context of the immigration system, and broader host society? How does their history of experiencing torture (particularly politically sanctioned torture) impact their ability to trust government systems and processes? Are perceptions being shaped by the larger sociopolitical climate of the U.S.? How are these conceptualizations of their circumstances and larger values and beliefs around immigration and asylum seekers impacting their mental health and wellness?)

This study was exploratory, so it was not conducted to create or confirm theoretical frameworks. However, although IPA methodological approach is not necessarily intended to create theory, such as other approaches like grounded theory, part of the interpretive work that goes into making meaning from interview transcriptions can be informed and understood through the lens of existing theoretical frameworks, such as Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (Larkin et al., 2006). Therefore, part of the process of analyzing the data and identifying themes involved conceptualizing the data through these frameworks.

An IPA was used to identify and examine patterns and themes that represent the data from the interviews and ultimately, shed light on the experiences of the participants. This process involved the following steps: working with a team of undergraduate and post-baccalaureate research assistants to verify interview transcripts, applying initial set of codes and identifying emergent themes in each interview, meeting for consensus meetings to discuss codes and themes, reviewing transcripts, recordings and notes to finalize themes and sub-themes within and across all interviews, getting feedback from team on finalize themes and sub-themes, and identifying quotes that represent each theme. Notes and transcripts were reviewed by the researcher and

research assistants after completing each interview to become more familiar with the data. This process allowed for making iterative changes and brainstorming possible follow-up questions during the next interview.

Prior to data collection, all research assistants were trained to assist with transcribing (word-for-word transcription) and with coding using Dedoose software. After each interview, the researcher reviewed and cleaned transcripts that were generated from the Zoom video recordings. A research team member was then assigned to verify the transcript for accuracy using the interview's audio recording. Only the portions of the interviews that were conducted in English were transcribed. After the transcriptions were finalized, the transcripts, along with notes and memos created by the researcher during and immediate after interviews, were reviewed by the researcher and the second coder (a research assistant) who was assigned to each interview. Codes were then independently applied to each transcript by the researcher and by the same second coder assigned. Emergent themes were identified based on commonality in content and meaning of codes. The researcher and research assistants met for consensus meetings to discuss the interview content, codes and emergent themes pulled from the transcript. Given the in-depth and subjective approach to IPA, the researcher then independently reviewed coded transcriptions, handwritten interview notes, and consensus meeting notes to finalize themes and sub-themes within each interview. This process led to identifying possible connections and patterns across the interviews after reviewing each new interview. This iterative process of noting themes within and between interviews led to a finalized list of themes and sub-themes that was reflective of the content from the six different interviews. Once themes and sub-themes were identified, the researcher shared finalized themes with the research team to ensure consensus among the team of coders. Quotes were then identified to help exemplify the themes.

Establishing Rigor

The verification guidelines outlined by Morse et al. (2002) were used to ensure that the study was designed, conducted, and analyzed with rigor. Striving for congruence between the literature, study design, research questions, interview protocol, data collection process and qualitative analysis required frequent evaluation of the data and making necessary changes in a non-linear fashion throughout the data collection phase (Morse, 2002). Additionally, to ensure that all parts of the research were being reported properly, the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) Checklist was utilized after collecting and analyzing study data (Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007).

The interview protocol was designed with the intention of asking questions that aligned with the research study questions, with the ultimate goal of achieving methodological coherence. As interviews were conducted with participants, it was important to be observant and identify potential emergent themes that arose from the data. Because this was an exploratory study, it was also critical to remain flexible and responsive to information that participants were sharing that could inspire new questions throughout the data collection process (Morse, 2002). Although this did not lead to iterative changes to the interview protocol, this approach informed the decision to ask specific probing questions to better understand the lived experiences of participants, their perspectives on the sociopolitical climate, and questions regarding their intersecting identities based on the content of earlier interviews.

Concurrent analysis and collection of data provided more insight into identifying questions that called for further exploration based on responses that participants provided (Morse, 2002). Furthermore, this process of constantly reviewing the data allowed for a deeper

understanding of the ways in which participants' experiences align, or do not align, with theoretical frameworks and literature on asylum seekers.

Transcriptions were reviewed iteratively as data was collected, coded and analyzed with the assistance of the research team. This concurrent approach of collecting and analyzing the data simultaneously was also intended to help attain reliability and validity while being mindful of the emergence of initial patterns, possible codes, and new questions that need to be posed during upcoming interviews, in addition to assessing for data saturation (Morse, 2002).

Although Morse (2015) recommends clarifying researcher bias as part of the process of ensuring credibility, or internal validity, this would conflict with the analysis approach. When conducting an interpretative phenomenological analysis, the researcher is part of the process of making meaning of the content shared by the participants, with the participants. Therefore, the data collection and analysis process were not conducted in an unbiased manner. However, internal validity was ensured through other recommended approaches, such as engaging in negative case analysis (Morse, 2015). This involves analysis of both typical cases and outliers. Participants were recruited with a range of experiences, both those who were granted asylum, those who had applied for asylum and were appealing their denied request, those who had applied for asylum and were waiting for final determination of their case within the past two years, and one participant who appealed his initial denied request and has been seeking asylum for almost a decade. According to Morse (2015), this approach can help promote validity by highlighting the differences between the commonly occurring cases and those that are more atypical, thereby providing a better understanding of the phenomena of interest.

Identifying a researcher's qualifications, strengths, and weaknesses that may support or hinder them from conducting the study, analyzing the data and reporting the findings is an

important part of establishing rigor in a qualitative study (Morse, 2002). The researcher has extensive background and academic training in psychological human participant research. experience and foundational knowledge in working with community partner organizations and conducting qualitative research, over a year of experience providing clinical services to asylum seekers who have survived torture as a therapist at Kovler, and nine years of experience interviewing and working with sensitive populations that have histories of trauma.

Throughout data collection and analyses, the researcher worked under the supervision of Dr. Anne Saw, her advisor and dissertation chair. Dr. Saw has expertise in working with immigrant and refugee populations and exploring the psychosocial impacts of migration stressors on refugee mental health, in addition to examining the sociocultural and structural influences on health behaviors through community-engaged research. She also has established relationships with community partners at Kovler and has worked with several immigrant and refugee communities in the Chicagoland area to address mental health disparities through community-based interventions. The researcher also referred to the expertise of her dissertation committee for guidance and consultation throughout the data collection and analysis process. Dr. Christine Reyna is an expert on research focused on prejudice and discrimination and their impact on social and political issues. Dr. Reyna's past research has also provided more insight into the ways that anti-immigrant sentiment is related to the sociopolitical climate and group relations. Dr. Megan Greeson's background in qualitative and community-based research, as well as her expertise in interviewing populations who have been impacted by trauma, was also helpful throughout the course of the project.

Additionally, the researcher's external committee readers, Dr. Maria Ferrera and Dr. Howard Rosing, both have extensive experience of working with and advocating for the needs of

asylum seekers and other local immigrant communities. Dr. Ferrera's area of practice involves addressing health disparities around undocumented immigrants in Chicago and understanding how this population has been impacted by healthcare law. Dr. Rosing is a cultural anthropologist who serves as the Executive Director of the Steans Center and as a faculty member in DePaul University' s Refugee and Forced Migration Studies Program. His area of focus is centered on helping faculty and students engage in community-based research and service-learning initiatives with community partners. Finally, Dr. Martin Hill, the Associate Director of Research and Evaluation at Kovler, was also very helpful in sharing his insights and knowledge of clients served at the center and has aided in the development of the data collection protocol and recruitment efforts.

Results

Five superordinate themes, Perspective on Identity, Uninformed and Unresponsive Immigration System, Navigating the Immigration System without a Roadmap, Retraumatizing System, and Internal and External Factors that Shape Experience, in addition to twelve subordinate themes, emerged from the interpretative phenomenological analysis (Table 2). These themes and subordinate themes, along with exemplar quotes, are described here.

Table 2

Themes Derived from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Perspective on Identity	Visible vs. Invisible Marginalized Identities
	Asylum Seeker Identity

	Disconnect from Roles and Purpose
Uninformed and Unresponsive Immigration System	Need for Trauma-informed Approaches
	Need for Culturally Responsive Processes
	Need for Understanding the Sociopolitical Context of Asylum Seekers
Navigating the Immigration System without a Roadmap	Self-Advocacy
	Learning by Doing
Retraumatizing System	Criminalization of Asylum Seekers
	Retelling One's Story
Internal and external factors that shape experience	Protective Factors
	Risk Factors

Perspectives on Identity

In the first superordinate theme, Perspective on Identity, the participants reflected on their intersecting marginalized identities as Black asylum seekers and how having these identities has shaped their lived experiences. They shared how their self-perceptions influence their feelings of safety, interpersonal dynamics, social isolation, experiences of discrimination, and shifts in roles and responsibilities.

Visible vs. Invisible Marginalized Identities

All six participants shared their perspectives on identity as it related to their experience of going through the immigration system in the U.S. Some of the participants highlighted the protective nature of being able to move through spaces without outwardly appearing to hold specific identities, such as their insecure legal status and their nationality. In these cases, some participants noted that they felt a level of safety being able to hide their identity as an immigrant

and as an asylum seeker, versus other identities, such as their racial identity, that were harder to hide.

Participant 3 spoke of his observations and experiences as a Black immigrant experiencing multiple levels of discrimination resulting from his intersecting marginalized identities. Participant 3, Participant 2, and Participant 5 all elaborated on the different cues that others observed that informed others of their identities as immigrants, including their names, accents, and when they spoke French. They all shared sentiments around the barriers that impacted their ability to access employment opportunities due to discriminatory practices and prejudice.

Participant 2 noted that she has faced both "encouraging" and overtly racist, xenophobic, and derogatory comments that involved telling her to "go back to where you came from." She shared that her worst experience involved a client who told her she did not want her to be her hair stylist because she did not speak English, and because she and another hair stylist were monkeys who smelled.

Participant 3 shared the double layer of discrimination that many Black immigrants face:

> There is a double layer to it; at a certain point in this country, we are discriminated against or in many cases treated unequally. On top of that you are Black and an immigrant at the same time. Two layers of things you have to pass. If you pass as a Black person, you are an immigrant and then you fail. You have to jump [through] many loops. I interact with many immigrants, and it's a continuous thing you have to navigate. Whether it's accessing opportunities or how you speak, your accent, so it's almost like a

> double barrier, not just your skin color but also the fact that you are an immigrant, so that puts a big stress.

The lack of recognition of their identities and affiliations left some participants feeling disconnected and lost. Participant 4 reflected on the distance he felt from his country of origin, Togo, due to the lack of signifiers and ties that his background. He noted, “I don’t think that people recognize me as Togolese. I don’t feel like myself here.”

For Participant 1, discussions around identity were more centered on his identity as a sexual minority. He emphasized the feeling of safety he felt as a sexual minority in the U.S. compared to his country of origin. When asked about his feelings on possible changes in these protective laws for the U.S. LGBTQ+ community in the future, Participant 1 reiterated his feelings of safety and trust that there would always be a layer of protection in place due to a different mentality and less stigma in the U.S. “I knew that in selecting the United States it was a country that has protective laws for people who are homosexuals.” He went on to note that, “People are accepted despite their differences. Without judgement, without stigma.” This presented as one of many instances of perspective and lived experiences shaping perceptions and emotions regarding the state of things in the U.S. Specifically, coming from a country in which he was beaten by the police for his sexuality, the increasing media coverage of anti-LGBTQ+ policies in the U.S. seemed insignificant by comparison. The participant may have also not be aware of proposed and confirmed changes in legislation regarding the LGBTQ+ community that were occurring at the time of the interview.

Similarly, several participants’ experiences of being Black were shaped by their experiences as members of the racial majority group in their countries of origin. It is possible that this contributed to perceptions and experiences that were very different from the

researcher's, given her context as a Black American who was aware of the U.S.'s long history of anti-Blackness and systemic oppression against BIPOC communities. For example, when asked about his perceptions of how Black Americans are treated in the U.S., Participant 5 pointed out that his perspective is shaped by his own color-blind ideology, noting that "I don't consider myself to be a racist person. I'm not racist. I tend to look beyond the color of people's skin, so it is a little incomprehensible that this is like a big discussion in the U.S." Given his lack of understanding of the ongoing discussion on race in the U.S., it makes sense that he may not be as perceptive and aware of any form of differential treatment in the U.S. based on race or other sociodemographic factors. Indeed, most participants did not identify with or report on experiences of interpersonal or systemic racism as Black people living in the U.S.

Asylum Seeker Identity

In addition to reflecting on the ways in which their interactions with others are shaped by their intersecting identities, some participants also emphasized the importance of marking the distinction between the identity of an asylum seeker versus that of an immigrant who may have migrated for economic reasons. Participant 4 emphasized how much he left behind when he fled Togo, including his wife, daughter, and friends. He also elaborated more on the negative impact of being forced to flee his home country, including disturbed sleep, a limited sense of freedom, and on ongoing feeling of uncertainty regarding his future and his ability to see his daughter again. Participant 4 also shared that this process involves putting trust in his lawyer to accurately tell his story and his experiences as an asylum seeker to immigration court.

Participant 4:

> There's a difference between an immigrant and, someone who sought asylum. I'm an asylum seeker. I'm not, you know, I'm not an immigrant. I don't plan on, like, . . . I'm not here to, like, start to dive into my entire life. This has been, you know, 5 years. I haven't seen my daughter. I don't think people understand, like, what we sacrifice when we leave our families. Yeah, I could say that, you know, since I've arrived here like I feel a little bit liberated. I have my sister. That's good, but, you know, a police car drives by and I feel like they're looking for me...can't, if I don't take medicine, I don't sleep. I don't, you know, identify as an immigrant. I identify as a refugee and I see it's because I can't go back to my own country and I have friends there who are there in prison. They're still in prison. They've been in prison. .... When I left a lot of people that I loved. It's not easy. And I can't go back to my country, it's the same regime. I used to work over there. I asked my sister if she thinks I ever could go back and I think she said no and I don't really do anything here whereas over there I used to work. Everything, my friends, everything, it's all over there. So to be a refugee it's like really not the same, you know. I left my wife I left my daughter. …. There's no way for me to go back or have my family next to me if it's the same government that's in power in Togo. I fear that I'm gonna, you know, die over here without ever seeing my daughter.

Disconnect from Roles and Purpose

Some participants highlighted a sense of disconnection from their identities and the roles that they held back in their country of origin. This was particularly the case for Participant 4, who elaborated on the struggles of feeling like himself in a completely new context. He shared how hard it was to feel like he used to without his usual environmental factors, such as his belongings and community, and without having the same purpose and responsibilities that he

once held in Togo. He expressed a sense of despair due to not being able to contribute in meaningful ways to his family.

Participant 4:

> Oh, I don't feel like people here need me. You know, like here, I don't work. I don't, you know…even like my clothing and stuff, like it doesn't feel like it's mine. I have no signifiers that tell me that these are, like, my things. It's hard.

Similarly, Participant 6 also talked about the shift in roles from working as a businessman in Togo to working as a certified nursing assistant here.

Uninformed and Unresponsive Immigration System

Within the second superordinate theme, Uninformed and Unresponsive Immigration System, participants pinpointed areas for growth and improvement within the immigration system through increased education and training for agents of immigration court. Participants shared their thoughts on improved methods or approaches that can be taken when working with asylum seekers in the first two sub-ordinate themes, Need for Trauma-Informed Approaches and Need for Culturally Responsive Processes, including specialized training in culturally responsive and trauma-informed approaches for immigration officials working with this population. The third sub-ordinate theme, Need for Understanding the Sociopolitical Context of Asylum Seekers, highlighted the need for agents of the system to have an increased awareness of the sociopolitical context of asylum seekers who are coming from countries where there is less-publicized conflict.

Need for Trauma-informed Approaches

Several participants reflected on the need for more education and training on trauma-informed approaches for agents within immigration court, including judges, asylum officers, and attorneys. When interacting with agents of immigration court, participants observed a concerning lack of consideration of the impact of exposure to trauma and life adversity on their functioning. Participants commented on the impossibly high standards and unrealistic expectations of them to physically present a certain way in court (facial affect and body language aligned with the content of their trauma accounts). Participant 3, elaborated on the ways that trauma exposure can shape someone's affect and presentation when describing the trauma. He reflected on the clear lack of awareness, or possibly lack of consideration, of the ways that exposure to trauma may negatively impact one's memory.

> There is no…they don't have any trauma-informed interview processes in the asylum interview with USCIS. You are asking someone to speak in graphic detail what is [the traumatic thing that happened to them], and why you are asking for asylum. Many people who are applying for asylum, there is a tendency for their mind to block out traumatic experiences and for the asylum process, everything you don't remember. They ask you for paperwork, and they mark it up with x's for each contradiction, but for someone who names, places, and graphic details…to me, that sounds like a planned asylum application. If I wanted to plan it, I could have these details down and then share my case. People who do that are people that are doing fraudulent applications, but these are people that end up getting asylum. Folks that have trouble remembering things and presenting evidence are denied.

Need for Culturally Responsive Processes

Some participants highlighted the ways cultural background and norms may impact body language and non-verbal communication. Participant 3 observed that many officials in immigration court seem to conceptualize asylum claims through a narrow Western lens and may not be considering factors such as cultural differences in non-verbal and verbal behaviors, particularly within the context of expressions of distress.

Participant 3:

> It just felt like the judge was approaching everything from a typical American lens. People are coming from a completely different cultural context, but the judge was viewing [things] from an American lens. There needs to be some sort of training, context.

Participant 3 advocated to have more specialized training to help increase awareness and understanding in cross-cultural expressions of distress and challenge implicit biases. He elaborated on the ways that implicit biases may negatively impact asylum case outcomes. He also emphasized the need for more training and consideration regarding these factors:

> People tend to be kinder and help people who look like them, this is a natural tendency, and its privilege in the asylum process, this disfavors certain people, while it favors others. That, in addition to the implicit biases, leads a lot of people to the asylum process. If there is anything I would advocate for, for the asylum system or officers, judge system, to…for them to really, outside their own training [job training], is to really have that perspective as well, of do you know how your biases [are influencing the process of] interviewing someone who speaks differently, and that their motions and gestures might mean different things to you?

Cross-cultural misunderstandings can be further exacerbated by language barriers and limitations that come with using interpreters. Participant 6 highlighted the gravity of being misunderstood within immigration court, "Sometimes the interpreters, they can't interpret exactly what I'm trying to say…. I think the opportunity to speak with these people [immigration officials] you [they] have to you know kind of understand the situation because otherwise it has the possibility of really killing us."

Need for Understanding the Sociopolitical Context of Asylum Seekers

In addition to the need for understanding the cultural context of asylum seekers, participants also spoke to the importance of immigration officials understanding the sociopolitical context that led them to flee their home countries. As Participant 6 noted,

> Yeah, I mean, I, [what] people only need to understand is that we were [are] victims of political violence and government violence that forced us to leave our countries. And so, we come here to search for some relief, and like a feeling of relief. If so, if the agents there refuse us, it gives us like a whole 'nother [sic] illness in our whole bodies. It's another weight.

Furthermore, some participants highlighted the perplexing issue of immigrant officials having unrealistic expectations that seem to be based in a lack of understanding of the nature of what it means to be an asylum seeker. Several participants shared moments in court when they were expected to provide evidence that would be exceptionally difficult to obtain or keep up with while making the dangerous migration journey fleeing their country of origin and then traveling through other countries. Participants, such as Participant 3, questioned the unrealistic and unreasonable expectations to present a clear, linear account of their experience, in addition to

corroborating evidence. Although this requested information may be important in making a final determination of one's asylum claims, the lack of understanding and flexibility allotted to asylum seekers who are missing information or evidence is dismissive of the plight that asylum seekers face when fleeing their country of origin.

Participants noted that these unrealistic expectations of immigration judges, lawyers, and officers reflect a fundamental lack of understanding of the sociopolitical context of which they fled. Participant 3 noted:

> It is easy for a judge to see that there is a war in Sudan on the news, but from people in other countries, it may be less in the media, it gets more difficult, and there isn't an understanding of the degree of the oppression that leads people to leave and seek asylum if there isn't war.

He went on to draw connections between the lack of understanding of the sociopolitical conflict and the unrealistic demands that are asked of asylum seekers in court:

> Judges need to have more of a political and cultural context. It makes a difference where it's very important that there is [more context], [when it's] not on CNN or where there is war (Ukraine) or Venezuela, it is harder for asylum seekers to make an argument. Asylum process - it is common for an [asylum] officer to ask for a notarized letter from your home country from someone who knows that this happened to you. Let them write a letter of support - this seems really ordinary and okay, but then the thing is getting a notary in other countries is a government thing. You have to go to a government official - someone [who] is running away from a government that tortured them. Now you are saying to go to the official to stamp it and implicate themselves. No one would do that,

> but it seems a reasonable ask from their [immigration officials] perspective. Here in America you can go to anyone for notarizing.

Participant 3 emphasized the ways that obtaining government sanctioned and notarized documents may not only risk their lives, but also the lives of their loved ones, “They [the judge] say why [don’t you] just ask someone to write it [a letter of support]? It could actually risk their life. And they [the judge] said okay, well then you are not credible.”

Participant 4 voiced similar concerns about other official agencies sharing similar unrealistic expectations, particularly when he was trying to obtain a social security card after receiving his work permit so that he could look for employment.

> There was another person and they refused me. It wasn't the right papers. And they asked me my date of birth, my nationality. And they told me that I just didn't have the right papers and so there was nothing they could do for me. And so they told me to, like, go to the Togo embassy and ask for a new passport, but I don't know how I'm gonna do that. Like how can I go to that embassy and ask for a new passport to seek asylum? It’s because of the government of Togo that I'm here, like how could I go back there and ask them for a new passport?

Navigating the Immigration System without a Roadmap

In addition to sharing ways in which the agents of the immigration system could be better informed, several participants also called attention to their own lack of clarity and information about the process of seeking asylum. In the third superordinate theme, Navigating the Immigration System without a Roadmap, participants expanded on the ways that they addressed some of their own limited understanding of the U.S. immigration system by doing their own

research, connecting with professionals, and using trial and error to learn as they went through the process. In the first sub-ordinate theme, Self-Advocacy, participants described how they used self-advocacy to learn about the process on their own and by seeking information and assistance from professionals (i.e. case managers and lawyers). In the second sub-ordinate theme, Learning by Doing, participants elaborated on the ways they learned about the process through trial and error and by learning more from other asylum seekers along the way.

Self-Advocacy

Throughout the interviews, there were no references to educational trainings or resources that participants utilized to learn more about the U.S. immigration system. Rather, several participants elaborated on the methods they used to educate themselves and engage in self-advocacy to better understand the process. Specifically, Participant 1 discussed how he spent time looking into housing options and immigration agencies before connecting with a series of professionals that helped guide him through the process. He noted, “I did some research on certain agencies that could help me, for people who are in my situation.” Along the way, his resourcefulness and motivation helped him gain access to other opportunities while awaiting final determination on his case, including getting a driver’s license and a work permit.

Similarly, Participant 3 noted that he started looking more into the process before submitting his initial application. He also received some guidance after consulting with his friend who was a lawyer. He shared that his initial denial of asylum made it clear to him that he would need to hire a lawyer to help him with his case.

Several participants, including Participant 2, Participant 6, and Participant 5, provided more insight on the ways that their attorneys helped them file their applications, apply for work

permits, and prepare for immigration court. Specifically, participants shared how their lawyers helped with filing the application and other necessary documentation and provided more information about the process. Participant 5 noted that he felt better and more hopeful about his chances of being granted asylum because his lawyer let him know that he had a strong case. He also noted that his lawyer helped prepare him for court. “Yeah, no, my, my lawyer helped me, explained what, what was gonna be done to make my case.”

Additionally other participants described the benefits of being connected with case managers at Kovler and other agencies. Participant 4 shared that case managers at Kovler helped connect him to a lawyer from Kovler,

> When I started the asylum process, I didn't know it at all. It was the people from Kovler who really helped me. Yeah, and it was from them that I received a message that there was a lawyer who was going to take my case. I made an appointment. And in fact, it was that lawyer in Kovler Center that made the request for me, the request for asylum.

Participant 1 also noted that mental health services through Kovler, as well as group therapy at another local organization, “allowed me to get, it's what gave me a little bit of confidence today and to accept my situation of the past and to live more in the present.”

Some participants, including Participant 3 and Participant 2, emphasized the need to continuously self-advocate for themselves, even after receiving professional support from their lawyers. Participant 3 noted that this continuous engagement and self-advocacy in his case was necessary to ensure his case was as strong as possible, even after obtaining legal assistance. He noted that he was unsure how helpful the lawyer actually was, due to his continuous arduous efforts of compiling the documentation needed for his case:

> With a lawyer it helps in a way. I have been doing work on my own. Everything I have to put together, everything I need, I had to write it. Even when we went to court, the lawyer didn't say much. They weren't involved, and maybe that is just how it works here. The lawyer seemed to want to look nice in front of the judge. I had to do it all for myself…. Maybe they [immigration lawyers] don't do much but present documents and make sure everything is filed on time.

Participant 2 also reflected on times in which she and her husband had to make sure they were actively involved in the process of submitting all documents in a timely manner, even when working with a lawyer. "So we did the application, but the lawyer did not send it in, and it was a little bit later that the father of my daughter asked the lawyer if she had, you know, sent everything in, and she said she hadn't. And it took her about a month that she held on to the document before she dropped it off."

Learning by Doing

Despite the assistance from lawyers and case managers, some participants noted that there were still levels of ambiguity regarding the next step in the process. Some participants acknowledged that they were still left with questions regarding timelines and understanding bureaucratic administrative delays in paperwork. This may have been partially attributed to the limited contact that some participants had with their attorneys. Participant 4 noted that they had never even met their attorney in person, only connecting with them through text message. "So I've never seen my lawyer. It's just these messages. I just get messages."

The confusion and uncertainty that are inherent in the immigration process does not start with resettlement in the U.S. For many asylum seekers, such as Participant 2, 4, and 5, there is a

lot of learning that comes with migrating through several countries where they may not speak the language, are uncertain about the proper steps of interacting with immigration officials in each country, and are faced with dangerous situations. Participant 4 shared how he was extorted for money by immigration officials in Mexico, only to be sent back to Guatemala due to entering Mexico at the wrong location.

> So we just kept walking towards immigration. They were there with the soldiers and they had these huge arms like really big like that. [gestures] I was like, like when I left, you know, it was like we felt so lost and confused. There they told us, you know, like we're gonna take you or we're not gonna take you. And so they took us, they took us somewhere. They took us back to prison. And then we spent two more weeks over there. And then they took us back to the Guatemalan border, which is the country that we had come from, but it was because we had entered Mexico [in] like the wrong place.

There is also a lot of confusion that comes with being detained with limited explanation or understanding once reaching the U.S. border. In these situations, it was apparent that participants were not always able to seek out information and clarity. Rather, they were expected to just follow orders without questioning the rationale. Participant 2 discussed details of being detained, along with her child and partner. She noted that her husband was forced to wear an ankle monitor upon leaving the detention center. When asked if they knew why he was forced to wear a monitor, she noted, “No, we didn’t. We couldn't talk about it. Yeah, in that situation you just did what you were told. If they told you to walk, you walk. If they told you were gonna wear the bracelet, you wear the bracelet.” In addition to feelings of confusion, Participant 2 also shared the negative impact this had on her husband’s mental health.

Participant 5 highlighted how information was sometimes shared informally from other asylum seekers throughout the migration journey. He explained that he learned more helpful information from another asylum seeker while detained. “It was when I was in detention that I learned about all of this…You know, there were people with me who were in detention and they'd been trying to do this for two years, three years.”

Although participants did not directly advocate for more streamlined resources and trainings for asylum seekers to learn more about the U.S. immigration system, their shared experiences of seeking out their own information highlighted the need for more accessible and educational resources that can help demystify the U.S. immigration system. Ideally, these resources would provide a foundational roadmap for asylum seekers as they go through the process.

Retraumatizing System

In the fourth superordinate theme, participants explored the retraumatizing nature of the U.S. immigration system, particularly calling attention to the glaring parallels to the criminal justice system. Participants elaborated on how the immigration system often perpetrates harm in the way it operates. Some participants also addressed the experience of having to repeatedly share their story with people within and outside of the immigration system. Some participants spoke to the complicated duality of wanting others to bear witness to their lived experiences and their story, while also acknowledging the difficulty in being forced to recount one’s experiences in order to be granted asylum and access to social services in adversarial, non-trauma informed interactions.

Criminalization of Asylum Seekers

Participants shared their experiences of being treated like criminals from the point of entry in the U.S. throughout their time of seeking asylum. Participants 2, 4, and 5 all noted that they were detained and held in at least one detention facility upon arrival to the U.S. The ways in which some participants discussed their time in detention centers was indicative with the punitive nature of being detained. For example, Participant 4 noted that when he was "arrested" upon arrival at the U.S. border, and then when he was released on "parole" he was able to reconnect with his sister who lives in Chicago. He also shared that, "That was the day they liberated me from prison." Participant 2 noted that her partner was forced to wear an ankle monitor once they were released from detention. She described the emotional toll that this took on him:

> He was constantly, like, he was constantly bothered because he was scared he was gonna be incriminated for something. Yeah, and it cost him a lot of, you know, pain and anguish. He cried every day. He didn't know what he'd done wrong…He hadn't stolen anything. He hadn't done anything.

Participant 5 noted that he was surprised that he was detained for such a long time upon arrival. "I was in prison for one week and then I was in a detention center for three weeks. Um, so a month in total. It was horrible."

In addition to detention, participants shared other ways in which the immigration system mirrored the criminal justice system. The prime example that was discussed by several participants was their experience in immigration court and during interviews with asylum officers. Whether it is sharing one's experience with lawyers and asylum officers, or recounting the specific details regarding the events leading up to, during, and following the event (or chronic experience) that led one to flee, participants described the pressure that is put on asylum

seekers to carefully articulate all the minute details within their trauma narrative. Even though Participant 5 was informed by his lawyer that he had a "really strong case," he still felt pressure to say the right thing in court, "To demand asylum, it really feels like you're passing a test and like taking an exam. And so I knew that there were still gonna be things that I needed to say correctly, or not to say." Participant 6 also highlighted that this pressure to meet expectations and to say the right thing in court is significant because it could mean the difference between life or death for asylum seekers. After his initial denied application for asylum, Participant 6 noted, "Yeah, I've already started studying again for the questions for what I should say, what I shouldn't say."

There is usually an expectation to provide corroborating evidence to support their claims, much like any criminal court case where evidence is used as part of the final determinations. Participant 3 noted,

> When it comes to immigration court, they need a lot of first-hand immigration evidence – someone who saw something, someone who could say they were there and saw what happened. It's hard to get this. It's hard to get documents, especially if you were running, but that is how the system is. That is how it is set up.

He highlighted why these expectations may make sense for a criminal case, but for asylum seekers, it is unrealistic to expect that people who have been exposed to torture and other trauma that forced them to flee their country would have the memory, emotional capacity, and the documentation that is expected of them. Participant 3 noted, "The threshold of evidence is how you would handle a regular American criminal case."

For individuals who have faced extensive trauma and ongoing stress, these adversarial experiences that are engrained within the process can be retraumatizing. Both Participant 6 and Participant 3 described the parallels between their interviews with the asylum officers and an interrogation of a criminal suspect – both experiences being so long and exhaustive that they just wanted to say anything for the process to be over. Participant 6 recalled both him and the officer being fatigued and exhausted by the interview that lasted hours.

Retelling One's Story

Throughout this process of seeking asylum, the participants, much like other asylum seekers, were expected to share their story with people at every step in the process. This included sharing upsetting and sometimes graphic and retriggering details of their past torture and persecution with case workers, attorneys, asylum officers, and immigration judges. In these cases, participants noted how challenging it can be to divulge these troubling memories and series of events that led them to seeking asylum.

Some participants, including Participants 4, 6, 3, and 1, provided additional perspectives on the possible benefits of sharing their experiences. One important factor in understanding differences in responses to retelling one's story seem to be the context and purpose of sharing. For example, Participant 4 emphasized the feeling of social isolation he felt from others, including family back home, individuals in the community who are not forced migrants, and even his sister (whose refugee status allotted her certain protections and privileges that Participant 4 did not have access to because of his insecure legal status as an asylum seeker) due to a lack of understanding of his lived experiences. He noted that it was important for others to understand how he came to be in his current situation. He used this interview with the researcher as a platform to share his experiences and for someone to bear witness to his suffering. When the

researcher clarified that he did not have to provide specific dates of moments throughout his migration experience, Participant 4 responded, “It’s part of my story.” In doing so, he emphasized the importance of disclosing details of his experience for the sake of being known and understood.

Similarly, Participant 3 drew attention to the fact that there is an underrepresentation of Black immigrants in the media when it comes to discussing forced migrant populations, thereby emphasizing the need to give more asylum seekers come from African countries more of a platform to share their stories:

> I don’t think Africans are well represented in the asylum process. When you think of asylum seekers, you don't think of African immigrants and asylum seekers. They are not really well-[known] voices. There is no representation of the voice of African asylum seekers, and their challenges that they face. So advocacy and non-profits that are servicing the Latin community, this is fine, but there is a lack of advocacy and services and help intended for African asylum seekers.

Similarly, Participant 6 echoed that importance of having the opportunity to be heard and understood by immigration officials. He emphasized the deadly ramifications that could possibly result in them misunderstanding any part of asylum seekers’ personal narratives. Participant 1 also noted the personal benefits that he experienced in being able to process his past safely in sessions with his therapist at Kovler and learning how to express himself more in group therapy at an LGBTQ+ organization.

It can be a cathartic, therapeutic, and validating experience to share one’s story. For the participants, much like other asylum seekers, the process of recounting one’s personal narrative in a supportive and safe environment can help in the healing process. It can also help raise

awareness to immigration officials and the general public of the plight that is faced by forced migrants from different parts of the world.

Although there are positive aspects of sharing, several participants highlighted the ways in which recounting their experiences within the context of the immigration system feels much more adversarial and anxiety-provoking. As Participant 3 pointed out, this is partially due to the way in which questions are asked and the lack of consideration of how trauma exposure can impact memory and functioning,

> They don't have any trauma-informed interview processes in the asylum interview with USCIS. You are asking someone to speak in graphic detail what is [details of persecution], and why you are asking for asylum. Many people who are applying for asylum, there is a tendency for their mind to block out traumatic experiences and for the asylum process, everything you don't remember.

He pointed out that the interview process feels more like being interrogated by the asylum officer who "is looking for inconsistencies in your story" while you are trying to prove credible fear. For this reason, Participant 3 also emphasized the need to have a lawyer, noting that "It's easy to trick someone who doesn't have a lawyer."

Internal and External Factors that Shape Experience

Although the experiences of the participants varied due to personal circumstances and factors (e.g., method of entry, country of origin, reason for seeking asylum, financial resources, familial support, access to legal services, etc.), there was also a sense of commonality among participants having all survived torture and now seeking asylum. They all discussed the emotional toll of going through the U.S. immigration system, consisting of factors including, but

not limited to, family separation, being in a prolonged state of threat, uncertainty, and confusion, being forced to revisit the most difficult moments of your life repeatedly when recounting your experiences, lack of stability and access to basic social services and human rights, lack of employment and financial constraints, and adapting to a new culture, language, and ways of living – often while mourning the loss of their loved ones and community. Due to prolonged wait times and bureaucratic red tape, many asylum seekers, including many of the participants, are faced with these realities for long, drawn-out periods in which they may not be able to plan for their futures due to fears of possible deportation, as well as limited resources. Participants shared the protective factors that aided them, along with the risk factors that made it harder to cope with the aspects of this process that were out of their control.

Protective Factors

Participants elaborated on the adaptive coping strategies and protective factors that have helped them persevere while existing in a state of ongoing stress and uncertainty. These strategies include relying or leveraging internal assets (e.g., religious faith, optimism, legal status), as well as accessing support from others.

Positive Outlook. Although all participants reported hardships that have arisen during the process of seeking asylum, several participants framed their experience in a manner that reflected their ongoing positive outlook, optimism, gratefulness, and sense of hope that their circumstances would improve one day. For example, when asking Participant 5 about how being separated from his daughter and seeking asylum has affected his well-being, he noted that his positive outlook helped him cope. “I'm a positive person even though there've been moments that are stressful, like, I'm trying to, to think of it that way, to stay positive.” When discussing other factors that may influence one’s sense of well-being, such as feeling welcomed in a new

environment, Participant 6 shared his feelings on being in the U.S, "The U.S. has housed me and welcomed me, and I have to say thank you to the United States."

Religious Faith. There seemed to be a notable overlap between having a positive outlook and the participants' religious faith. Participants 6 and Participant 4 noted that whatever the outcome of their asylum case, it was "God's will." Their faith helped them sit with the uncertainty of not knowing if they would be granted asylum. In some cases, religious beliefs also helped with accepting and coping with the ambiguous and prolonged wait times that have become impossibly long for many asylum seekers over the past few years.

Participant 6 noted:

> I still feel really strong [after being denied asylum], and like I mentioned I have faith in God…At the beginning it was really, really hard for me. But I'm a Christian. I pray every day. I read the Bible. And I keep telling myself that like if things aren't happening, maybe it's not the right time, and things will happen in the right time.

Religious beliefs also helped some participants, like Participant 4, make sense of their past traumatic experiences, "I still thank God that he saved me."

Legal Status. Participant 1 and Participant 6 shared details about their pathway into the U.S. that differed from other participants who crossed the borders and were detained soon after. Both participants had a visa and the financial means that enabled them to fly into the U.S. Given the dangerous conditions that often arise throughout migration through South and Central America, in addition to the stress of being detained (sometimes several times), the possession of a visa not only helped them circumnavigate some of the potential stress that comes with entering

the country without a visa, but it also reflects their possible high socioeconomic status prior to fleeing their countries of origin.

Support From Others. In addition to the support from lawyers, case managers, and other professionals, several participants benefitted from the support and assistance from strangers. Participant 4, for example, described his experiences of gaining more insight into the process of migrating and seeking asylum from someone he met along his journey. He also shared about the kindness of strangers that helped him make his way to his sister after being dropped off in the middle of nowhere with 20 other asylum seekers after leaving a detention center when he was granted parole:

> So the eighth of January 2022 they gave me parole. And so I called my sister and they dropped us off in a place where I didn't know where we were. It was at night. They dropped us off by the grace of God there was a guy who arrived. And at this point we were about 20 people. The guy and the women they approached us and they asked if they could take us somewhere so we could bathe and they got us something to eat. And it was nighttime, my phone was dead. I had nowhere to charge it. I didn't have any signal. So there was people who had like, kind or already left, they kind of gone off on their own after we'd been but others of us, you know, we didn't know where we were. We had no idea what we were gonna do, to leave or to move forward. And so we accepted when this man and woman approached us.

He noted that these strangers not only helped provide him and the other asylum seekers with food, clothing, a phone to call family, and a place to bathe and sleep, but they also gave him money to buy a plane ticket to meet with his sister in Chicago. "They gave her the money so we could buy the ticket and then they took me to the airport and that's how I arrived in Chicago."

Risk Factors

There were several factors that had a negative impact on participants' well-being as they went through the process of seeking asylum. Much like protective factors, these risk factors (i.e. lack of access to basic needs, unemployment, family separation, prolonged wait times, discrimination, and social isolation) further exacerbated the stress that comes with going through the immigration system. Many of these factors and circumstances are common among asylum seekers, and are unique challenges that are associated with their insecure legal status and policies that are built into the U.S. immigration system. Additionally, many of these factors exist and operate outside of the individual level, and involve the external layers of the ecological system, such as the microsystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.

Lack of Access to Basic Needs. For many asylum seekers, including Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 6, obtaining and maintaining secure and safe housing can be very difficult. Although Participant 1 did prior research and exploring of housing options when he arrived in Chicago, he was unable to afford housing due to being unemployed. He was not able to apply for positions until his worker's permit was approved and sent to him:

> When I first arrived, I was in a hotel and did some research, and this was the first shelter that I arrived at, and it's where I still reside…Yeah, there's not a lot of comfort. Everything is shared, but it's what I was able to accept at the beginning because I couldn't work. I had no choice but to live in the shelter.

For other participants, like Participant 2 and Participant 6, both reported having a home, but Participant 2 noted that they needed to find another home because they were being told to leave due to new management. Participant 6 shared that he lived in an apartment where he and his daughter shared one bedroom, and another person rented out another bedroom. He expressed

that he wanted to find another apartment so that his daughter could have her own room.

Much of the housing insecurity discussed within interviews was heavily connected to other risk factors, such as financial constraints and lack of employment opportunities. Several participants noted that they were waiting for their work permit to be approved before they could find a legal position. For Participant 1, receiving a work permit meant that he could finally apply for jobs and move out of the shelter he was staying in.

For Participant 4, not being able to work impacted his sense of identity. He no longer felt like he was useful to anyone:

> What I told the Kovler Center when I arrived was that I don't really like to be stuck at home. But you know, if I could leave the house to go to work or something, I would absolutely do that instead of just leaving for other reasons. The problem right now is that I still don't have social security.

For this participant, having a work permit was not enough. Without a passport (which was stolen while migrating), he was having difficulty obtaining a social security number.

For participants who reported being employed, several of them, including Participant 6 and Participant 3, shared their experiences of working in jobs that were unrelated to their education or previous careers. Participant 6 was working as a certified nursing assistant during the time of his interview. He noted that he previously worked as an international businessman. The difficulty of finding employment opportunities was rooted in legal constraints and social ones, such as discrimination. Participant 3 reflected on his time in the U.S. waiting for asylum over the past 10 years. Although he had a master's degree, he noted that he had to work in all types of jobs due to his legal status and because he was an immigrant:

> You come in and are educated, and it is still tough to find a job, even someone with college education, but at least you have a foundation to start out with. Black Africans, [that] have an accent, [and are] not educated, you are categorized by the African Black community... I started from scratch. [I] did all the retail jobs, minimum wage jobs, I did it all…It has affected me for sure, levels of discrimination, having to start out waiting tables even though you have college education to being already put in a certain box even before you speak, but those are challenges that lots of people of color deal with, but I think for immigrants, even though it's one pocket within that group, people have all sorts of challenges and discrimination.

Participants 5 and 2 also spoke about the difficulties of finding a job (Participant 5) and keeping a position (Participant 2) due to discrimination based on their names, languages spoken, and their identities as Black African immigrants. Participant 5 stated, "When I'm sending in job applications and stuff like that, people might decide that they prefer to hire an American, [rather] than somebody from Africa, like me."

Family Separation & Social Isolation. Of all the stressors and risk factors that were discussed by participants, family separation and social isolation were two prominent topics mentioned by half of the participants. Specifically, Participants 6, 5, and 4 each shared how they were impacted by being apart from their children and significant others. Although Participant 6 was living in Chicago with his daughter, his wife and three other children were still in Togo. Similarly, Participant 5 also noted that his 11-year-old daughter was still in Togo. Unlike the other participants, Participant 5 was the only one who had been granted asylum. He shared his plans to apply to bring his daughter to the U.S. to live with him once he applied for a green card (one year after receiving asylum). He also shared his thoughts on the importance of a two-parent

household to ensure proper upbringing and discipline in a child's life. He reflected on the high rate of single mothers in the U.S. and attributed that to the high rates of Black children that become incarcerated. He advocated for more social service support for single mothers to address this issue.

Participant 4 expressed his fears of dying in the U.S. without ever being reunited with his young daughter and wife again and the toll that has taken on his mental health:

> There's no way for me to go back or have my family next to me if it's the same government that's in power in Togo. I fear that I'm gonna, you know, die over here without ever seeing my daughter again...It's been, you know, five years I haven't seen my wife or talked to her. And it's not easy.

In addition to the challenges of being separated from his family in Togo, Participant 4 also commented on his ongoing concern for his friends who are still being persecuted, "All my friends over there they don't, you know, have things to eat or you know they're like killing each other," and to his feelings of isolation that develop from being an asylum seeker:

> Truthfully, it's hard to find people I want to be friends with just because it's a different mentality and I have different, you know, concerns in my own situation, my own family that a lot of people don't necessarily relate to.

Not only did he report experiencing a longing for his wife and daughter, but also a feeling of being misunderstood by other extended family members and friends who had a different perception of what his life was like in the U.S.

Discussion

This study was conducted with the goal of learning more about the lived experiences of survivors of torture who have sought asylum within the U.S. A secondary goal was to understand how perceptions of the sociopolitical climate within the U.S. has impacted participants, particularly regarding their sense of well-being. There was also an emphasis on understanding the unique perspectives of asylum seekers migrating from African countries, as there are often limited spaces for the voices of Black forced migrants to share their experiences of going through the U.S. immigration system. Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach, information gathered from the semi-structured interviews was interpreted by the researcher to make sense of the lived experiences with the participants. Analyses highlighted asylum seekers' perspectives on identity, need for education, use of self-advocacy and self-education to demystify the process, experiences with a retraumatizing immigration system, and internal and external factors that shape their experiences as asylum seekers.

This study provided participants with a platform to share personal narratives. Although there has been an increase in discourse regarding the unique challenges that refugees face (e.g., Bemak & Chung, 2017), less is known about the plight of asylum seekers, and their distinct experiences. Aside from sharing one's experiences within the context of immigration court, there are limited opportunities for asylum seekers to openly share their stories with others. Findings from this study build on the growing literature centered on asylum seekers and other forcibly displaced migrants (Bracken & Gorst-Unsworth, 1991; Gerritsen et al., 2006; Leiler et al., 2019 Center for Victims of Torture [CVT], 2021; Jannesari et al., 2022; Jannesari et al., 2020, Tewolde, 2021).

Much of the current literature that speaks to the experiences of forced migrants emphasizes mental health outcomes that stem from traumatic and stressful experiences in their

countries of origins and during their migration journey (Jannesari et al., 2020; Knipscheer et al., 2015; Steel et al., 2009). Rather than explicitly describing psychological distress and symptoms, participants spent more time elaborating on the factors that made the process of seeking asylum more challenging. Results from this study provided more insight into the post-migration stressors that asylum seekers encounter while going through the immigration system. The results also highlighted the major changes that occur when one flees their home country to seek asylum, including shifts in identity, perspective, sense of purpose, roles, responsibilities, and family dynamics.

It is possible that this specific group of participants, who were all connected to Kovler, fared better than other asylum seekers who have survived torture because they had more access to social services and other support (Procter et al., 2017). Another factor that made this sample unique when compared to other asylum seekers who have survived torture is that they were all connected to immigration lawyers due to their connection to Kovler and other community organizations that serve forcibly displaced migrant populations (Meffert et al., 2010). This reiterates the importance of examining access to services and interactions with others within their socioecological network when understanding mental health outcomes within this population.

Findings reiterate the importance of understanding the risk and protective factors that shape asylum seekers' experiences through a socioecological lens. Factors that participants shared, such as social isolation, lack of access to basic needs and services, in addition to unemployment, family separation and discrimination, were centered around different aspects of their socioecological environment, particularly within the microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Notably, these risk factors, particularly a lack of access to social services, family separation, and unemployment, are more prevalent among asylum seekers than among refugees

and other migrants. Unlike refugees, asylum seekers are not guaranteed access to employment and social services due to their insecure legal status (Meffert et al., 2010; Migration Policy Institute, 2021). Also, unlike migrants who may be migrating for economic reasons, asylum seekers may lack support systems, established networks, and career advancement opportunities that are available to other immigrants. Without guaranteed institutional and systemic support, asylum seekers are put at a disadvantage to navigate the immigration system with more risk factors and less protective factors than other migrants. This further marginalizes asylum seekers and creates greater economic, mental, and physical health disparities when compared to other migrants.

Protective factors that helped participants get through this process of seeking asylum were also a combination of internal (e.g., religious faith, self-advocacy, positive outlook) and external factors (e.g., social and legal support). More research is needed to identify additional protective factors. Notably, access to social services and internal resources such as religious faith and positive outlook were especially protective for participants. Further research is needed on risk factors, particularly family separation, that may hinder psychological healing and lead to increased negative mental health outcomes. This is especially salient for asylum seekers who, unlike individuals with refugee status, are more likely to flee their countries of origin without family members. Further research on these protective and risk factors may be useful for researchers, case managers and other providers, agents of immigration court, community organizations, and policy makers that serve this population.

It is likely that it will take time to fully understand the impact that going through the immigration system has on asylum seekers' well-being. When thinking about Judith Herman's (1998) Three Stages of Recovery from Severe Trauma Model, many asylum seekers may be

stuck in the first stage of recovery. This initial stage is characterized by establishing a sense of safety and stability, gaining and utilizing emotion regulation skills, and self-care. It is unlikely that many asylum seekers can move to the next stage of remembrance, mourning, and grieving, while they are still in a prolonged state of uncertainty and struggling to meet basic needs. It is possible that over time, there may be more recognition of the impact that this process has on mental health, and the capacity and opportunity to engage in the processing needed to reflect and grieve. It is also possible that fully sitting with many complex emotions and distress may be so overwhelming that it would negatively impede one's ability to engage in all the steps of seeking asylum.

Additionally, all but one participant in this study has been going through the asylum-seeking process for under two years. Therefore, it is likely that they may not be in a place to fully engage in the reflection and work needed to understand the mental health impacts of going through the immigration system. Some, including Ryan et al. (2019), use the two-year marker as an indicator of "prolonged" wait times. After the two-year mark, Ryan et al. (2019) noticed higher rates of negative mental health outcomes than participants who had resettled in a Western country for under six months. It is possible that the mental health and functioning of the participants may continue to worsen over time if their case proceedings continue for longer periods of time. Future research, particularly longitudinal studies, can help understand the long-lasting impacts on well-being.

When working with this population, it is important for providers, especially mental health providers, to understand where clients are at in their recovery process. Recognition and understanding of the recovery stage can be an important consideration when engaging in treatment planning with clients who are in the process of seeking asylum. During my time as a

therapist at Kovler, this was especially salient for the clinical work that I engaged in with asylum seekers who had survived torture. Many clients were in the process of trying to establish a sense of stability as they were seeking out legal and social services.

One surprising theme that emerged from the interviews with the participants was the seeming lack of awareness of the lived experiences of asylum seekers by those within the immigration system. One of the most expressed needs was for agents of immigration court to be more understanding, trauma-informed, culturally competent, and informed on the sociopolitical context and the impact of trauma exposure on functioning. Some participants also highlighted that without additional training, immigration judges and asylum officers will continue to make final determinations that are influenced by their own implicit biases and are based on unrealistic expectations (e.g., expecting an asylum seeker to ask the government who persecuted them for a notarized document as part of their evidence). Without reform in this area, asylum seekers will continue being faced with interactions and experiences that can be more harmful than helpful.

These findings also bring attention to the need for more mental health professionals who are trained to complete forensic asylum evaluations. These assessment reports often include relevant summaries of political conflict in geographic regions and persecution of specific marginalized groups, along with cited literature and clinical insight that can help contextualize information that asylum seekers provide in their asylum application materials. Forensic asylum evaluation assessments provide immigration officials with more information when making final determinations.

Participants also shed light on the need for more information regarding the immigration process. The pattern that connected all the personal narratives that were shared was that there was no instruction manual or clear road map for asylum seekers. Although there are websites and

online materials available to help provide information on the process, these resources may not be accessible to asylum seekers who often lack basic resources. The text in these resources can also be difficult to understand due to jargon-heavy content and language barriers. The U.S. immigration system is ever-changing and can be quite convoluted, even for professionals who work within the immigration system (Darrow & Scholl, 2020). It is a complex system and asylum seekers are often forced to work their way through it on their own, while simultaneously struggling to access basic needs like secure housing, food, and financial resources (Bracken & Gorst-Unsworth, 1991; Jannesari et al., 2022). This journey is further complicated by language and cultural barriers (Obinna, 2023). These obstacles speak to larger systemic issues and a clear need for a way to communicate information about the process of seeking asylum (e.g., expectations, timelines, forms, etc.) with asylum seekers before they start the process. This can help prevent confusion and misinformation about the immigration process (Ruokolainen & Widén, 2020).

Findings from this study also highlight the need for more humane treatment of asylum seekers, especially those being detained. Participants' experiences throughout the asylum-seeking process bring attention to the striking parallels between the U.S. immigration system and the criminal justice system. The overlap between the two systems is demonstrated by the processes of asylum seeking (e.g., appearing in court, prolonged stays in detention centers, providing corroborating evidence as part of one's claim, wearing ankle monitors, limited access to social services and liberties). The parallels between the two systems may leave asylum seekers feeling as though they are criminals, despite fleeing persecution in search of refuge and asylum. Although participants did not elaborate on the toll that this has taken on them, it can be concluded that going through an inherently violent system where they are forced to repeatedly

recount graphic and minute details of past traumatic experiences, all while living in an ongoing state of uncertainty and insecurity, is likely to have negative impacts on the mental health and well-being of the participants. Recommendations to make the asylum process more trauma-informed may help mitigate some of the negative impact of applying for asylum and going through immigration court.

This study addressed the gap in the literature on the experiences of Black asylum seekers who have survived torture. All six participants were asylum seekers from countries in Africa, and therefore, held several marginalized intersecting identities within the context of the U.S. as Black immigrants who lacked secure legal status. This left several participants to navigate the immigration system while facing what Participant 3 described as a “dual layer” of discrimination (Kretsedemas & Gow, 2024; Nkimbeng et al., 2021). Themes from the interviews called for more spaces to hear the stories of asylum seekers, in addition to more advocacy and support for asylum seekers coming from the Black Diaspora. Future research is needed to continue exploring the unique experiences of Black asylum seekers. It is notable that five of the participants were living in Chicago, and one who was living in New York City at the time of their interview. It is important to continue exploring the lived experiences of Black asylum seekers who are seeking asylum in geographic locations that are less diverse and less accepting of immigrant communities.

The varied experiences of importance placed on different identities is reflective of the fact that both current and past context and lived experiences can influence how one moves through spaces given identities that may be invisible or visible, as well as salient versus not salient, to an individual. It was notable that participants’ views of their own intersecting identities differed from my own perception. Specifically, I assumed that the participants’ racial

identity would more heavily shape their lived experiences. As a Black, Haitian American second-generation immigrant, my experiences of race and racial identity are a culmination of my own experiences and background, in addition to my understanding of systemic and institutionalized racism that is at the foundation of this country. My personal values, views, experiences, and understanding of U.S. history and current affairs led me to assuming that current discourse and media coverage on an increase in policies on immigration, ongoing racial discrimination and police brutality, would negatively impact asylum seekers who may identify as Black or coming from the Black diaspora. However, this was not the sentiment that was shared by most participants. I believe this is in part due to the fact that race is a social construct, and it is not recognized or acknowledged in the same way for people in different countries. This may be especially true for asylum seekers who are coming from African countries where there are many different ethnic groups, but racial background may not be a salient, or recognized, demographic variable. Therefore, the emphasis placed on race in the U.S. understandably may seem unusual or excessive to immigrants coming from countries where other aspects of one's identity were more salient (i.e. religion, ethnic background, gender, sexual orientation). These findings reiterate the importance of exploring intersectionality beyond the context of U.S. notions of identity.

Additionally, through the interviews, and through other discussions with providers who have worked with Black immigrants, there seems to be a distancing of African immigrants from Black/African Americans by some African asylum seekers. This distinction that is rooted in the acknowledgement that people of the Black diaspora have varied lived experiences, cultures, histories, and customs. This metaphorical, and possible literal, distancing that Black asylum seekers from various countries may engage, may also be protective. Some of the racial

discrimination that they may experience, witness, or learn about, may seem like something that happens more to Black/African Americans, and not to Black immigrants.

These differences in perspective could also be a function of a possible evolution that may occur over time in one's racial identity development. Self-perceptions and understanding of one's own racial identity often develop over time. This is also a process of socialization. This process involves exposure to both positive (i.e. exploration, celebration, and positive discourse regarding one's racial identity with friends and family) and negative experiences (i.e. experiences of racism) that may be internalized and ever-changing across one's lifespan.

Sociopolitical Climate

My secondary goal of gaining a better understanding of the impact of the current sociopolitical climate in the U.S. on participants' sense of well-being was not a central topic that was clearly discussed in-depth in most interviews. When the idea for this study was first formulated in 2020, there were a myriad of social issues that were coming to the surface – particularly with the growing recognition of ongoing systemic oppression against BIPOC communities and an increased awareness of police brutality against Black and Brown communities – particularly after the highly publicized murder of George Floyd, a slew of new immigration policies and laws, and a rise in violence and discrimination against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders driven by racism and xenophobia in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic (Beckett & Hankins, 2021; Campbell et. al., 2018; Gover, Harper & Langdon, 2020). There were also many changes in immigration policy that were both leading to prolonged wait times for asylum seekers and also attempts to decrease them (Pierce & Bolter, 2020). These changes were partially a response to presidential administrations, increased and ongoing global conflict, and a system that was impacted by the pandemic (Pew Research Center,

2022). For these reasons, it seemed imperative to understand the lived experiences of asylum seekers through as sociopolitical lens.

The process of understanding the sociopolitical and historical significance of certain social issues takes time to not just learn this information, but to fully absorb it, and to reflect on how this shapes our own experiences within this space. By definition, asylum seekers have fled state-sanctioned violence, often at the hands of their own governments (Migration Policy Institute, 2021). Their experiences here in the U.S. may pale in comparison to the persecution they faced prior to resettlement. Furthermore, these deeper reflections require time and capacity, and these things are often bottom of the list for those in Herman's (1998) first stage of recovery—establishing safety. Even if asylum seekers are temporarily safer than they once were, they could be deported and they are often stuck in long-term states of uncertainty before their final deliberation.

There was not extensive discussion on discrimination based on intersecting marginalized identity within the interviews. Without deeper reflections on these topics, in addition to how participants were conceptualizing how they were being perceived, it was not possible to further explore how participants were internalizing messages they were receiving from those in their social network, the media, and the general public. Future research is needed to better understand how perceptions of the sociopolitical climate, experiences of discrimination, and exposure to xenophobic and racist discourse may be impacting the well-being of asylum seekers who have survived torture and have been in the U.S. for a prolonged period of time, or have resettled in a place that is less diverse.

Limitations

Although the interviews conducted with the participants yielded rich qualitative information that provided more insight into the lived experiences of asylum seekers who have survived torture, there were a few notable limitations to this study. The interview did not include specific questions regarding the reasons for seeking asylum. This question was intentionally omitted with the intention of taking a more trauma-informed approach to interviewing. If participants had shared details about their reason for fleeing, there was an openness to further probing. Details regarding participants' reasons for leaving their countries of origin would have likely led to gaining further insight into their experiences. Time constraints with some of the interviews prevented deeper exploration into their experiences.

Because the researcher prioritized trauma-informed approaches and decreasing unnecessary burden on participants, this study strayed from traditional IPA approaches. The researcher intentionally limited deeper probes into participants' past and current experiences and trauma. This also informed the researcher's decision not to reunite with the participants to collaboratively make sense of their shared experiences after their interview. Rather, the researcher explored deeper meaning and themes from the information provided during the interviews independently.

Additionally, five of the six interviews were conducted with the assistance of a French interpreter. It is likely that there were some things that may have been lost in translation. Moreover, having a third person added to the interview dynamic may have also contributed further discomfort in opening up more during the interview. Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that participants may not have felt comfortable sharing too many details regarding their experiences due to concerns about how participating in the study may impact their chances of being granted asylum. Although confidentiality policies were clearly reviewed prior to

participants consenting to participation in the study, it is understandable that participants may have been wary in the amount of details they chose to disclose as a way to protect their physical and emotional safety.

Future Directions

Future research is needed to better understand the role of specific risk and protective factors, both internally and externally within one's socioecological environment, that have an influence on the well-being of asylum seekers as they go through this process. Although this study ultimately did not explicitly focus on collecting data on mental health outcomes, future research that looks at mental health outcomes over time, possibly with the use of validated self-report measures and a longitudinal study design, may shed more light on the mental health of asylum seekers who have survived torture as they navigate the immigration process.

The participants who participated in this study were fairly similar in demographic variables, particularly age, gender, and geographic region. The goal of IPA is not to have generalizable data that can represent the experiences of all asylum seekers who have survived torture. However, it would be helpful to better understand the unique experiences of other survivors of torture who are seeking asylum who differ in age, gender, nationality, etc., to get a fuller picture of the experiences of this population. Additionally, all the participants had some affiliation with Kovler. Unlike many asylum seekers, they were able to access certain social services, such as case management and therapy, that many asylum seekers are unable to connect to. Therefore, their experiences may have been more positive in some ways when compared to other asylum seekers with similar backgrounds.

Although this study aimed to learn more about the impact of the sociopolitical climate on asylum seekers, there was not as much commentary shared on political or social issues within the interviews. It is possible that ideas and opinions around these issues may develop over time the longer asylum seekers are in the U.S. Furthermore, continued exploration on the impact of political unrest in one's country of resettlement, particularly after fleeing political unrest in one's country of origin is another area that would benefit from future research. The theme of retraumatization was discussed in relation to the immigration system, but more research is needed to understand how exposure to further violence may impact asylum seekers. Additionally, future research examining the relationship between surviving state-sanctioned torture and one's willingness to trust the government may help shed light on how past trauma may increase distrust in governing systems.

This study shed light on the lived experiences of asylum seekers who have survived torture. Information from this study can be used to understand how to meet the unique and complex needs of this subpopulation of forced migrants. It also provided a much-needed platform for Black immigrants to share their stories as they navigate the immigration system with intersecting marginalized identities within the U.S. context. The hope is that the themes that emerged from the IPA will help service providers at centers like Kovler, and agents within the immigration system, better understand the challenges that asylum seekers are faced with on a daily basis.

Information from this study, and other similar research, can also be used to shape policy and contribute to the development of interventions and programs designed to address some of the more challenging aspects of this process, including the lack of transparency and clarity in the process of applying for asylum, along with the need for more trauma-informed, culturally

sensitive, and humane approaches to working with asylum seekers. Findings from this study also highlight the need for organizations that can assist in increasing access to social, legal, medical, mental health, and occupational services for asylum seekers. Without secure legal status, asylum seekers often struggle to meet basic needs of safety, shelter, food, and healthcare. Despite having access to services offered by Kovler, the participants still faced many obstacles while seeking asylum. It is important that findings from this study help address the disparities that this population faces.

References

Baugh, R. (2020) *Annual flow report: Refugees and Asylees: 2019*. U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Office of Immigration Statistics. https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2019/refugee_and_asylee_2019.pdf

Beckett, B. I., & Hankins, S. K. (2021). "Until We Are First Recognized as Humans": The killing of George Floyd and the case for Black life at the United Nations. *International Journal of Human Rights Education, 5*(1). 1-29.

Bemak, F., & Chung, R.C.Y. (2017). Refugee trauma: Culturally responsive counseling interventions. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 95*(3), 299-308. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12144

Bögner, D., Herlihy, J., & Brewin, C. R. (2007). Impact of sexual violence on disclosure during Home Office interviews. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, *191*, 75–81. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1192/bjp.bp.106.030262

Bracken, P., & Gorst-Unsworth, C. (1991). The mental state of detained asylum seekers. *Psychiatric Bulletin, 15*(11), 657-659.

Brewin, C.R. (2011). The nature and significance of memory disturbance in posttraumatic stress disorder. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology, 7,* 203–227. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-032210-104544

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist, 32,* 513-531.

Castoriadis, C. (1987). *The imaginary institution of society.* MIT Press.

Campbell, B., Mendoza, A., Diestel, T., & News21 Staff. (2018, August 22). *Rising hate drives Latinos and immigrants into silence.* The Center for Public Integrity. https://publicintegrity.org/politics/rising-hate-drives-latinos-and-immigrants-into-silence/

Carrion, V. G., & Wong, S. S. (2012). Can traumatic stress alter the brain? Understanding the implications of early trauma on brain development and learning. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 51(2*, Suppl), S23–S28. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2012.04.010

Cavazos-Rehg, P. A., Zayas, L. H., & Spitznagel, E. L. (2007). Legal status, emotional well-being, and subjective health status of Latino immigrants. *Journal of the National Medical Association, 99*(10), 1126–1131.

Chu, T., Keller, A. S., & Rasmussen, A. (2013). Effects of post-migration factors on PTSD outcomes among immigrant survivors of political violence. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health, 15*(5), 890–897. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1007/s10903-012-9696-1

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*(6), 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989*(1), 139–167.

Darrow, J. H., & Scholl, J. H. (2020). Chaos and Confusion: Impacts of the Trump Administration Executive Orders on the US Refugee Resettlement System. *Human*

Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance, 44(4), 362-380. https://doi.org/10.1080/23303131.2020.1767745

da Silva Rebelo, M. J., Fernández, M., & Achotegui, J. (2018). Mistrust, anger, and hostility in refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants: A systematic review. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne, 59*(3), 239–251. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1037/cap0000131

Demuth, C., & Mey, G. (2015). Qualitative methodology in developmental psychology. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 668–675. doi:10.1016/b978-0-08-097086-8.23156-5

Dolezal, M. L., Alsubaie, M. K., Sheikh, I., Rosencrans, P., Walker, R. S., Zoellner, L. A., & Bentley, J. A. (2021). Differences in posttraumatic and psychosocial outcomes among refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 209*(1), 28–34. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1097/NMD.0000000000001248

Ehlers, A., Maercker, A., & Boos, A. (2000). Posttraumatic stress disorder following political imprisonment: The role of mental defeat, alienation, and perceived permanent change. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, *109*(1), 45-55. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1037/0021-843X.109.1.45

Ellis, B. H., MacDonald, H. Z., Klunk, G. J., Lincoln, A., Strunin, L., & Cabral, H. J. (2010). *Discrimination and mental health among Somali refugee adolescents: The role of acculturation and gender. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 80*(4), 564–575. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1111/j.1939-0025.2010.01061.x

Evans, F. B., & Hass, G. A. (2018). *Forensic psychological assessment in immigration court: A guidebook for evidence-based and ethical practice*. Routledge.

Fennig, M., & Denov, M. (2021). Interpreters working in mental health settings with refugees: An interdisciplinary scoping review. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 91*(1), 50–65. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1037/ort0000518.supp (Supplemental)

Gebreyesus, T., Sultan, Z., Ghebrezghiabher, H. M., Singh, N., Tol, W. A., Winch, P. J., Davidovitch, N., & Surkan, P. J. (2019). Violence en route: Eritrean women asylum-seekers experiences of sexual violence while migrating to Israel. *Health Care for Women International, 40*(7–9), 721–743. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1080/07399332.2019.1566336

Gerritsen, A. A. M., Bramsen, I., Devillé, W., van Willigen, L. H. M., Hovens, J. E., & van der Ploeg, H. M. (2006). Physical and mental health of Afghan, Iranian and Somali asylum seekers and refugees living in the Netherlands. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology: The International Journal for Research in Social and Genetic Epidemiology and Mental Health Services, 41*(1), 18–26. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1007/s00127-005-0003-5

Gover, A. R., Harper, S. B., & Langton, L. (2020). Anti-Asian hate crime during the Covid-19 pandemic: Exploring the reproduction of inequality. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, *45*(4), 647-667. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-020-09545-1

Gramlich, J. (2022, April 27). *Key facts about Title 42, the pandemic policy that has reshaped immigration enforcement at U.S.-Mexico border*. Pew Research Center.

https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/04/27/key-facts-about-title-42-the-pandemic-policy-that-has-reshaped-immigration-enforcement-at-u-s-mexico-border/

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods, 18*(1), 59–82. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1177/1525822X05279903

Haas, B. M. (2017). Citizens-in-waiting, deportees-in-waiting: Power, temporality, and suffering in the US Asylum system. *Ethos, 45*(1), 75–97. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1111/etho.12150

Heeren, M., Wittmann, L., Ehlert, U., Schnyder, U., Maier, T., & Müller, J. (2014). Psychopathology and resident status – comparing asylum seekers, refugees, illegal migrants, labor migrants, and residents. *Comprehensive Psychiatry, 55*(4), 818–825. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.comppsych.2014.02.003

Herman, J. L. (1998). Recovery from psychological trauma. *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences, 52,* S145-S150.

Herman, J. L. (1992). Trauma and recovery. Basic Books/Hachette Book Group.

Hill, M., & Everson, M. L. (2019). Indicators likely to contribute to clinical and functional improvement among survivors of politically-sanctioned torture. *Torture: quarterly journal on rehabilitation of torture victims and prevention of torture, 29*(3), 5–26. https://doi.org/10.7146/torture.v29i3.115202

Huang, X., & Liu, C. Y. (2018). Welcoming cities: Immigration policy at the local government level. *Urban Affairs Review*, *54*(1), 3-32.

Jannesari, S., Hatch, S., Prina, M., & Oram, S. (2020). “Post-migration social-environmental factors associated with mental health problems among asylum seekers: A systematic review”: Correction. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health, 22*(5), 1065–1066. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1007/s10903-020-01036-z

Jannesari, S., Molyneaux, E., & Lawrence, V. (2022). What affects the mental health of people seeking asylum in the UK? A narrative analysis of migration stories. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 19*(2), 295-315. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1080/14780887.2019.1581311

Kenny, M. A., Grech, C., & Procter, N. (2022). A trauma informed response to COVID 19 and the deteriorating mental health of refugees and asylum seekers with insecure status in Australia. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing, 31*(1), 62–69. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1111/inm.12932

Keygnaert, I., Vettenburg, N., & Temmerman, M. (2012). Hidden violence is silent rape: Sexual and gender-based violence in refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants in Belgium and the Netherlands. *Culture, Health & Sexuality, 14*(5), 505–520. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1080/13691058.2012.671961

Kira, I. A. (2002). Torture assessment and treatment: The wraparound approach. *Traumatology, 8*(2), 54–86. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1177/153476560200800203

Knipscheer, J. W., Sleijpen, M., Mooren, T., ter Heide, F. J. J., & van der Aa, N. (2015). Trauma exposure and refugee status as predictors of mental health outcomes in treatment-seeking refugees. *BJPsych Bulletin, 39*(4), 178–182. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1192/pb.bp.114.047951

Kretsedemas, P., & Gow, J. N. (Eds.). (2024). *Modern migrations, Black interrogations: revisioning migrants and mobilities through the critique of antiblackness / edited by Philip Kretsedemas and Jamella N. Gow.* Temple University Press.

Kristensen, G. K., & Ravn, M. N. (2015). The voices heard and the voices silenced: Recruitment processes in qualitative interview studies. *Qualitative Research, 15*(6), 722–737. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1177/1468794114567496

Laban, C. J., Gernaat, H. B. P. E., Komproe, I. H., Schreuders, B. A., & De Jong, J. T. V. M. (2004). Impact of a Long Asylum Procedure on the Prevalence of Psychiatric Disorders in Iraqi Asylum Seekers in The Netherlands. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 192*(12), 843–851. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1097/01.nmd.0000146739.26187.15

Larkin, M., Watts, S., & Clifton, E. (2006). Giving voice and making sense in interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 102–120. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1191/1478088706qp062oa

Leiler, A., Bjärtå, A., Ekdahl, J., & Wasteson, E. (2019). Mental health and quality of life among asylum seekers and refugees living in refugee housing facilities in Sweden. *Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology*, *54*(5), 543–551. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-018-1651-6

Leudar, I., Hayes, J., Nekvapil, J., & Baker, J. T. (2008). Hostility themes in media, community and refugee narratives. Discourse & Society, 19(2), 187–221. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1177/0957926507085952

Marshall, M. N. (1996). Sampling for qualitative research. *Family Practice*, *13*(6), 522-526.

Marton, F. (1981). Phenomenography—describing conceptions of the world around us. *Instructional science*, *10*(2), 177-200.

Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative researching.* Sage.

Mason, M. (2010). Sample Size and Saturation in PhD Studies Using Qualitative Interviews. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 11*(3). doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-11.3.1428

McDermott, H. W., & Ainslie, R. C. (2021). Multifaceted profiling and violence: Experiences of Mexican and Central American migrants to the United States. In P. Tummala-Narra (Ed.), *Trauma and racial minority immigrants: Turmoil, uncertainty, and resistance.* (pp. 31–49). American Psychological Association. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1037/0000214-003

McVane, B. (2020). PTSD in asylum-seekers: Manifestations and relevance to the asylum process. *Psychiatry Research, 284*. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1016/j.psychres.2019.112698

Meffert, S. M., Musalo, K., McNiel, D. E., & Binder, R. L. (2010). The role of mental health professionals in political asylum processing. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law, 38*(4), 479–489.

Meissner, D., Hipsman, F., & Aleinikoff, T. A. (2018). *The US asylum system in crisis:* Charting *a way forward*. Migration Policy Institute. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/MPI-AsylumSystemInCrisis-Final.pdf

Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Morse, J. M. (2015). Critical analysis of strategies for determining rigor in qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Health Research*, *25*(9), 1212–1222. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1177/1049732315588501

Morse, J., Barrett, M., Mayan, M., Olson, K., & Spiers, J. (2002). Verification strategies for establishing reliability and validity in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 1*(2), 13-22. doi:10.1177/160940690200100202

Musalo, K. & Rice, M. (2008). Center for gender & refugee studies: the implementation of the one-year bar to asylum. *Hastings International and Comparative Law Review*, *31*(2), 693–.

Nkimbeng, M., Taylor, J. L., Roberts, L., Winch, P. J., Commodore-Mensah, Y., Thorpe, R. J., Jr,, Han, H. R., & Szanton, S. L. (2021). "All I know is that there is a lot of discrimination": Older African immigrants' experiences of discrimination in the United States. *Geriatric Nursing*, *42*(1), 196–204. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gerinurse.2020.08.002

Obinna, D. N. (2023). “Alone in a crowd: Indigenous migrants and language barriers in American immigration”. *Race and Justice*, *13*(4), 488-505.

Pierce, S., & Bolter, J. (2020). *Dismantling and reconstructing the U.S. immigration system: A catalog of changes under the Trump presidency*. Migration Policy Institute. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/MPI_US-Immigration-Trump-Presidency-Final.pdf

Procter, N. G., Kenny, M. A., Eaton, H., & Grech, C. (2018). Lethal hopelessness: Understanding and responding to asylum seeker distress and mental deterioration. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing, 27*(1), 448–454. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1111/inm.12325

Raghavan, S., Rasmussen, A., Rosenfeld, B., & Keller, A. S. (2013). Correlates of symptom reduction in treatment-seeking survivors of torture. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 5*(4), 377–383. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1037/a0028118

Reiners, G.M. (2012). Understanding the differences between Husserl's (descriptive) and Heidegger's (interpretive) phenomenological research. *The Journal of Nursing Care, 01.*

Rhodes, S. D., Mann, L., Simán, F. M., Song, E., Alonzo, J., Downs, M., Lawlor, E., Martinez, O., Sun, C. J., O'Brien, M. C., Reboussin, B. A., & Hall, M. A. (2015). The impact of local immigration enforcement policies on the health of immigrant Hispanics/Latinos in the United States. *American Journal of Public Health, 105*(2), 329–337. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.2105/AJPH.2014.302218

Robinson, O. C. (2014). Sampling in interview-based qualitative research: A theoretical and practical guide. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 11*(1), 25–41. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1080/14780887.2013.801543

Rooney, L. K., Bhopal, R. S., Halani, L., Levy, M. L., Partridge, M. R., Netuveli, G., Car, J., Griffiths, C., Atkinson, J. P., Lindsay, G., & Sheikh, A. (2011). Promoting recruitment of minority ethnic groups into research: qualitative study exploring the views of South

Asian people with asthma. *Journal of Public Health (Oxford, England), 33*(4), 604–615. https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdq100

Ruokolainen, H., & Widén, G. (2020). Conceptualizing misinformation in the context of asylum seekers. *Information Processing & Management*, *57*(3), 102127.

Ryan, D. A., Kelly, F. E., & Kelly, B. D. (2009). Mental health among persons awaiting an asylum outcome in Western countries: A literature review. *International Journal of Mental Health, 38*(3), 88–111. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.2753/IMH0020-7411380306

Saksena, J., & McMorrow, S. (2021). At the intersection of gender and discrimination: Experiences of Congolese refugee women with social and cultural integration in the United States. *Women's Studies International Forum, 88*. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1016/j.wsif.2021.102517

Schock, K., Böttche, M., Rosner, R., Wenk-Ansohn, M., & Knaevelsrud, C. (2016). Impact of new traumatic or stressful life events on pre-existing PTSD in traumatized refugees: Results of a longitudinal study. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology, 7*. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.3402/ejpt.v7.32106

Shapiro, D. (2003). The tortured, not the torturers, are ashamed. *Social Research, 70*(4), 1131-1148. https://ezproxy.depaul.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/tortured-not-torturers-are-ashamed/docview/209669034/se-2?accountid=10477

Silove, D., McIntosh, P., & Becker, R. (1993). Risk of retraumatisation of asylum-seekers in Australia. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 27*(4), 606–612. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.3109/00048679309075823

Silove, D., Sinnerbrink, I., Field, A., Manicavasagar, V., & Steel, Z. (1997). Anxiety, depression and PTSD in asylum-seekers: Associations with pre-migration trauma and post-migration stressors. *The British Journal of Psychiatry, 170*(4), 351–357. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1192/bjp.170.4.351

Silverman, D. (2010). *Doing qualitative research*, Sage.

Simonsen, K. B. (2021). The democratic consequences of anti-immigrant political rhetoric: A mixed methods study of immigrants' political belonging. *Political Behavior, 43*(1), 143–174. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1007/s11109-019-09549-6

Song, S. J., Kaplan, C., Tol, W. A., Subica, A., & de Jong, J. (2015). Psychological distress in torture survivors: Pre- and post-migration risk factors in a US sample. Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology: *The International Journal for Research in Social and Genetic Epidemiology and Mental Health Services, 50*(4), 549–560. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1007/s00127-014-0982-1

Sourander, A. (2003). Refugee families during asylum seeking. *Nordic Journal of Psychiatry, 57*(3), 203–207. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1080/08039480310001364

Strauss, C. (2006). The imaginary. *Anthropological theory*, *6*(3), 322-344.

Steel, Z., Chey, T., Silove, D., Marnane, C., Bryant, R. A., & van Ommeren, M. (2009). Association of torture and other potentially traumatic events with mental health outcomes among populations exposed to mass conflict and displacement: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association, 302*(5), 537–549. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1001/jama.2009.1132

Steel, Z., Momartin, S., Silove, D., Coello, M., Aroche, J., & Tay, K. W. (2011). Two year psychosocial and mental health outcomes for refugees subjected to restrictive or supportive immigration policies. *Social science & medicine (1982), 72*(7), 1149–1156. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.02.007

Tamir, C., & Anderson, M. (2022, January 20). *One-in-ten Black people living in the U.S. are immigrants*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/race-ethnicity/2022/01/20/the-caribbean-is-the-largest-origin-source-of-black-immigrants-but-fastest-growth-is-among-african-immigrants/

The Center for Victims of Torture. (2021). *Designing a trauma-informed asylum system in the United States.* https://www.cvt.org/sites/default/files/attachments/u101/downloads/2.4.designing_a_trauma_informed_asylum_report.feb42021.pdf

Tewolde, A. I. (2021). 'Passing' as Black South African: Identity concealment tactics of Eritrean refugees in the face of xenophobia. *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, *27*(2), 184–196. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1080/13504630.2020.1816456

Tong A, Sainsbury P, & Craig J. (2007). Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): a 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care, 19*(6), 349 – 357.

Tran, A., Brickman, S., Jordan, J., & Samuelson, K. W. (2020). Predictors of posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression symptoms in survivors of torture living in the United

States. Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 208(8), 593–599. https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1097/NMD.0000000000001197

United Nations. (1984). *United Nations convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.* https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/cat.pdf

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2011). *The 1951 convention relating to the status of refugees and its 1967 protocol.* https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/about-us/background/4ec262df9/1951-convention-relating-status-refugees-its-1967-protocol.html

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2023). *Global trends forced displacement in 2022.* UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency. https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2022

Wenzel, S. L., Tucker, J. S., Elliott, M. N., Marshall, G. N., & Williamson, S. L. (2004). Physical violence against impoverished women: A longitudinal analysis of risk and protective factors. *Women's Health Issues, 14*(5), 144-154.

Appendix A

Figure 1: Interview Protocol

Section 1: Demographic Questions

1) What is your date of birth?
2) What is your gender identity?
3) What is your country of origin?
4) What languages do you speak?
5) Are you currently married?
6) How long have you been in the U.S?
7) Are you currently working? If so, what do you do?
8) How many years of education did you have? What type of educational experiences did you have?
9) What is your current living arrangement?

Section 2: Process of Applying for Asylum

1) When did you first start the process of applying for asylum?
2) What has the process of applying for asylum been like for you?
    a) Probing questions:
        i) Have you encountered any specific problems?
3) How has this process affected you and your sense of well-being and your mood?
4) Has the process of seeking asylum been stressful or upsetting?
    a) Probing questions:
        i) If so, what parts have been the most challenging or stressful for you?

5) Do you have any specific concerns related to your asylum application or upcoming court date?
    a) Probing questions:
        i) Have you had your court date pushed back further than expected?
        ii) If so, how does that make you feel?
        iii) Have you encountered any other unexpected delays?
6) Are you currently working with an attorney?
    a) Probing questions:
        i) If so, what has that been like for you?
        ii) Have you encountered any challenges while working with your attorney?
        iii) Do you feel like your attorney has adequately prepared you for your upcoming court proceedings?
7) Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experiences of going through the immigration process?

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

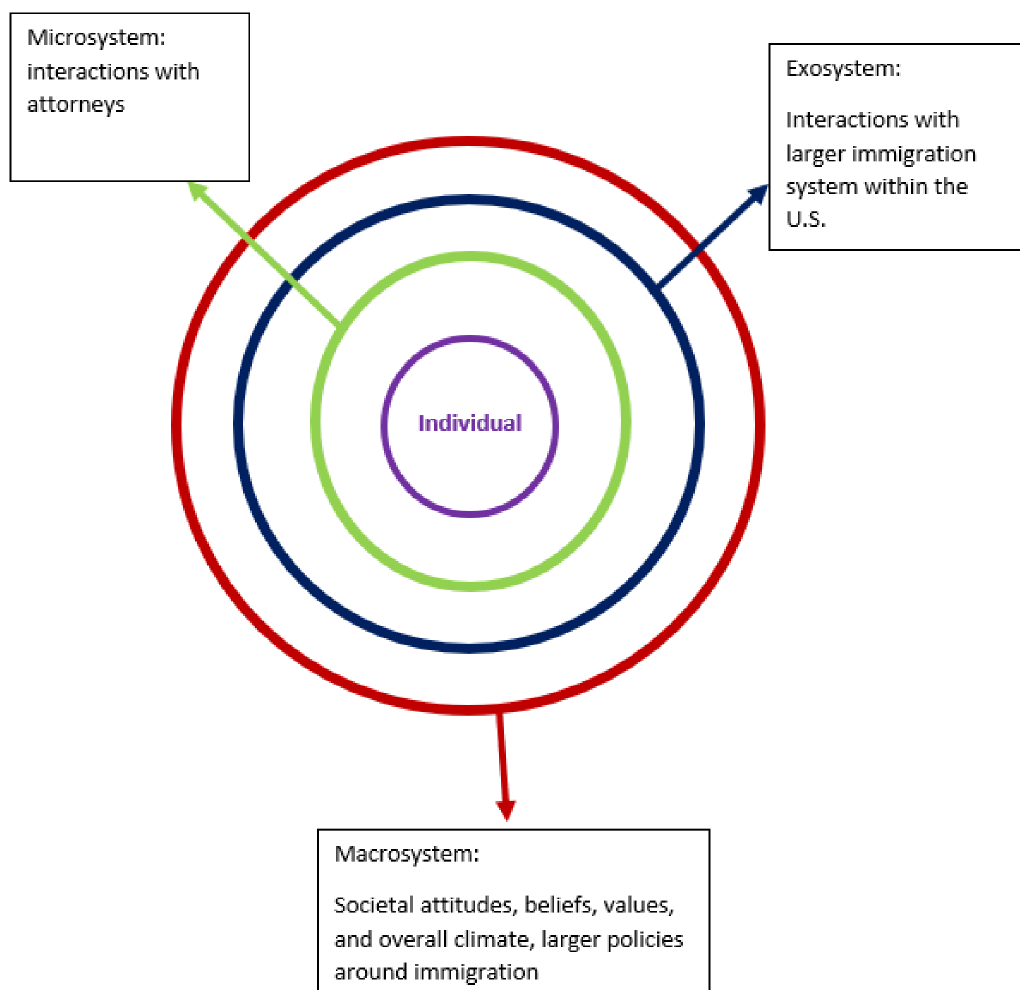

Figure 2: Participant Demographic Information

ID	Age	Gender	Relationship Status	Region of Africa Participant is from	Languages Spoken During Interview	Legal Status	Years in the U.S. (> or < 2 years)
1	37	Man	Single	Western Africa	French	Insecure – applied for asylum	< 2 years
2	24	Woman	Partnered – living with partner and child	Western Africa	French	Insecure – applied for asylum	< 2 years
3	39	Man	Single	Unknown region in Africa	English	Insecure – applied for asylum; appealing a denied request	> 2 years
4	37	Man	Married – wife and child in COO	Western Africa	French	Insecure – applied for asylum	< 2 years
5	39	Man	Single - child in COO	Western Africa	French	Secure – granted asylum	> 2 years
6	44	Man	Married & living with 1 child; wife and other children in COO	Western Africa	French	Insecure – applied for asylum; appealing a denied request	> 2 years

Figure 3: Themes Derived from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Theme	Subtheme
Perspective on Identity	Visible vs. Invisible Marginalized Identities
	Asylum Seeker Identity
	Disconnect from Roles and Purpose
Uninformed and Unresponsive Immigration System	Need for Trauma-informed Approaches
	Need for Culturally Responsive Processes
	Need for Understanding the Sociopolitical Context of Asylum Seekers
Navigating the Immigration System without a Roadmap	Self-Advocacy
	Learning by Doing
Retraumatizing System	Criminalization of Asylum Seekers
	Retelling One's Story
Internal and external factors that shape experience	Protective Factors
	Risk Factors