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Narrated Experiences of Sexual and Gender Minority Refugees: Resilience in the Context of Hardship from Pre- to Post-Migration

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Refugees from sexual and gender minorities (SGMs) face particular hardships, which demand adaptive responses. This pilot study explored SGM refugees' experiences of resilience within the context of hardship from pre- to post-migration. Eleven semi-structured interviews with SGM refugees who had migrated to Sweden were analysed using thematic analysis. Four themes were identified: (1) Concealing Identity in Response to Pervasive Oppression, (2) Living in Suspension, (3) External Sources of Support and (4) Strength from Within. Respondents reported utilising limited external resources and employing considerable internal resources in order to navigate and survive in the face of hardships that carried over and shifted across time. A more nuanced understanding of the connections between resilience and hardship is needed to inform post-migration reception practices and service provision in order to facilitate resilience in SGM refugees.

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INTRODUCTION

People who flee persecution on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity are a vulnerable population faced with significant burdens from pre- to post-migration. To navigate and survive these, resilience is required. Within psychological research, resilience has commonly been viewed as positive factors that emerge in spite of hardships (Connor & Davidson 2003; Luthar & Cicchetti 2000; Masten 2001). However, resilience occurs within the context of hardship, and the forms of resilience that emerge do so in relation to the hardships that are present. This interview study aims to examine sexual and gender minorities (SGMs) refugees' experiences of resilience within the context of hardships, from pre- to post-migration in Sweden.

Globally, people belonging to SGMs face widespread persecution (O'Flaherty & Fisher 2008). Broadly, documented forms of abuse include arbitrary arrest, torture and death penalty from state officials, physical and psychological violence perpetrated by family, community and organised groups, as well as discrimination in education, housing, employment and health care (OHCHR 2011). The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has described physical and psychological violence against SGM people as a type of gender-based violence 'driven by a desire to punish those seen as defying gender norms', and has reported that violence against SGM people tends to be 'especially vicious' compared to other types of hate crime, often involving a higher degree of brutality (OHCHR 2011: 8).

Though sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) is not explicitly specified as grounds for asylum under the Geneva Convention, SGM people fleeing persecution are increasingly recognised internationally as refugees on the basis of belonging to a 'particular social group' (UNHCR 2012: 11–13). The UN has issued guidelines recognising that SGM people fleeing persecution can qualify as refugees under existing asylum law, but these cases are treated inconsistently worldwide, with many countries refusing to acknowledge SOGI as bases for asylum claims (OHCHR 2012). In Sweden, fear of persecution based on sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression has been specified as a ground for refugee status since 2005 (SFS 2005: 716). In countries that do acknowledge SOGI asylum claims, the management of these is often substandard in a number of ways (OHCHR 2011). SOGI-related asylum claims have been subject to arbitrary review practices and inconsistent decision-making, a problem that has also been documented across EU member states (Jansen & Spijkerboer 2011). This has also been reported in Sweden; stereotypes, subjective assumptions and speculative arguments have been found to be common in the credibility assessments and rejection motivations of SOGI asylum claims in Sweden (Gröndahl 2020; Hedlund & Wimark 2019). During and after the asylum process, SGM people have been housed in facilities where they are subjected to threats and violence (Jansen & Spijkerboer 2011). Repeatedly, SGM asylum claimants have been deported to life-threatening circumstances and instructed to conceal their identity (Jansen & Spijkerboer 2011).

PERSECUTION IN THE PRE-MIGRATION CONTEXT

Existing research on SGM refugees indicates persistent exposure to dangers and abuses prior to migration, often from childhood onward. SGM refugees have reported an early onset of psychological and physical abuse from parents and family members, in response to perceived gender transgressions (Alessi, Kahn & Chatterji 2016).

A wide range of abuse was also experienced at the hands of peers, teachers and school officials, and homophobia and transphobia were reinforced in religious and community contexts (Alessi, Kahn & Chatterji 2016). SGM refugees report broad and repeated experiences of psychological, sexual, and physical abuse, discrimination, and persecution (Shidlo & Ahola 2013). Examples of such experiences include being publicly beaten or raped, arrest and torture, forced heterosexual marriage and losing a partner under violent circumstances (Piwowarczyk, Fernandez & Sharma 2017). In a study that compared the persecution experiences of SGM refugees to a demographically matched group of non-SGM refugees, SGM refugees reported higher rates of sexual violence, persecution by family members and childhood onset of persecution (Hopkinson et al. 2017). In terms of how SGM refugees described living through these pre-migration experiences, one study revealed accounts of living in a state of constant vigilance and fear, developing and using concealment strategies to pass as heterosexual or cisgender, and frequent victimisation in daily life (Alessi, Kahn & Van Der Horn 2017).

CONTINUED HARDSHIPS IN THE POST-MIGRATION CONTEXT

Psychological research on refugees tends to focus on trauma as a singular, short-term event in the pre-migration context, neglecting the risk of continued trauma during flight and after arrival in a host country (Alexander, Arnett & Jena 2017). When discussing trauma as a singular event, there is a risk of reproducing a simplistic refugee narrative where people experience traumatic events in their country of origin, leading them to flee and subsequently develop Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which in turn is treated in a host country that provides stability and distance from traumatic events. Research on forced migration has contradicted this view, showing that stressors carry over from a country of origin, through the process of leaving and into a host country where reception and treatment of refugees may be further traumatising (George 2010; Harms 2015).

Predominant ideas about western nations as safe havens and beacons of liberty for SGM asylum seekers have been challenged in research examining post-migration experiences of homophobia, transphobia, racism and xenophobia reported by SGM refugees (Murray 2014). The group has been found to experience vulnerability, lack of services and discrimination with regards to housing, employment and health care (Chávez 2011). Experiences of racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia in refugee reception centres and state-run housing (FRA 2017), combined with limited access to alternative safe and stable housing options have been reported as significant difficulties (Lee & Brotman 2011). This finding has also been described in Swedish research, where SGM asylum seekers have been housed in facilities where they are exposed to threats and violence (Lukac 2017). Gowin et al. (2017) highlighted the vulnerability of Mexican transgender women seeking asylum in the USA, where experiences of violence, unstable environments, lack of safety and economic insecurity often continued from pre- to post-migration; though stressors connected to being transgender were sometimes lessened upon migration, they were often replaced by problems stemming from asylum status. In a study of SGM refugees who fled from the Middle East, North Africa and Asia to Europe, respondents reported experiencing persecutory violence and abuse prior to, during and after arrival in the European host country (Alessi et al. 2018b).

RESILIENCE

As a concept in psycho-social research, resilience is often ambiguously and inconsistently defined; resilience across and within studies can be used to denote an outcome, a trait or a process (Rudzinski et al. 2017). In a review and concept analysis of the term, Windle (2011) established the following definition:

> Resilience is the process of effectively negotiating, adapting to, or managing significant sources of stress or trauma. Assets and resources within the individual, their life and environment facilitate this capacity for adaptation [...] in the face of adversity. Across the life course, the experience of resilience will vary.

This definition emphasises that resilience is adaptation within the context of hardship, which includes components both internal and external to the individual, and that is variable over time. The topic of resilience among SGM refugees is largely unexplored; this is unfortunate, as models of resilience specific to marginalised minority groups are needed to inform health-promoting interventions in these communities (Colpitts & Gahagan 2016; Iwasaki et al. 2005).

Kahn (2015) emphasises that although support from family and co-cultural communities has been described as an important resilience factor in research pertaining to refugees in general, these resources may be lacking for those who have broken cultural norms of gender and sexuality. This lack of familial and cultural connection and support proved to be a source of persistent grief for those affected (Kahn 2015). Similar findings are described by Manalansan (2006) who posits that the lack of familial affiliation leads queer migrants to establish networks of friends and lovers to mitigate the violence and rejection experienced from members of their biological families. Lee and Brotman's (2011) research highlighted some of the complexity inherent in seeking connectedness within the post-migration community of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (LGBT, these are SGM categories common in western contexts). Hoping to gain access to safe and supportive spaces, SGM refugees were instead met by racism and xenophobia in the mainstream LGBT community (Lee & Brotman 2011). Similarly, SGM refugees in Austria and the Netherlands described both positive and negative experiences in the LGBT communities of their host countries (Alessi et al. 2018a). When lacking the social support of co-cultural community, the LGBT community was for some SGM refugees a source of essential resources, while others reported being subjected to sexual exploitation and racist discrimination (Alessi et al. 2018a). LGBT community organisations working specifically with refugees and asylum seekers have been described as vital resources (Alessi 2016; Lee & Brotman 2011). The existing findings on resilience among SGM refugees tend to focus on the post-migration context, leaving experiences of resilience prior to forced migration unexamined. This may risk reproducing a narrative where pre-migration experiences are assumed to consist exclusively of suffering, and the host-country constitutes the harbinger of healing and growth. To avoid this tendency, this article considers experiences across the span of migration, from pre- to post-migration. The aim of this qualitative pilot study is to examine narratives of resilience within the context of hardships of SGM refugees in Sweden. This examination adds nuance to the emerging knowledge base about the hardships and supportive factors experienced by SGM refugees. A broader aim of the study is to increase awareness about SGM refugees among service providers in Sweden; we also hope that SGM refugees involved in self-organising and activism in Sweden will be able to utilise the published findings to amplify their own work.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Using purposive sampling, 11 participants were recruited through an LGBT community organisation for refugees during member meetings. After having received permission by the organisation, the study was briefly presented by the authors at two member meetings. After a brief presentation, potential participants were encouraged to initiate contact if interested in participation. To take part in the study participants were required to (a) be at least 18 years old, (b) reside in Sweden, (c) identify as belonging to a sexual and/or gender minority and (d) have sought asylum in Sweden. Out of the 11 participants, eight were men (one being a trans man) and three were women (one being a trans woman). Ages ranged between 27 and 48 years with a mean age of 36.2 years. Seven of the participants were gay, one was lesbian, two were bisexual and one was straight. All participants stated that sexual orientation or gender identity was a ground for their asylum claim, although three participants also had additional grounds.

Participants' countries of origin were: Afghanistan, Algeria, Cameroon, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and Syria. Participants had been in Sweden between 0 and 16 years, however, eight of the participants had been in Sweden for two years or less. Two participants had received permanent residency in Sweden; the remaining nine were either waiting for a decision or in the process of appealing.

DATA COLLECTION

Recruitment took place at member meetings held at an LGBT community organisation. The first two authors identify as LGBTQ, which was made clear to the organisation before recruitment. This was considered a key to gaining access to the study's target group as the organisation sought to ensure the safety of its members, who had extensive experiences of ill treatment from heterosexuals.

The first two authors conducted the semi-structured interviews, which were mostly carried out individually and in English, but in three cases participants chose, on their own initiative, to bring a trusted person to assist and translate into Swedish or English. Two respondents were interviewed together at their own request. All interviews were conducted between September and October 2017 in Stockholm, Sweden. The interviews were audio recorded and averaged at 78 minutes. Each interview started with shorter background questions and progressed to open-ended questions about positive and negative experiences prior to, during and after migration with suggestions for follow-up questions in the interview guide. To monitor the influence of subjective bias and emotional responses on the interview situation and analysis, memos were made continuously to document the recurrent discussions between authors throughout the interview and analysis phase of the research.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

During recruitment, potential participants were informed verbally and through written fliers about the aim of this study, its affiliation with Stockholm University, that participation would be voluntary and confidential, and that personal details would be excluded from the finalised study. Prior to the commencement of the interviews, participants were informed about the use of data for an academic paper as well as further publication. All participants gave their written informed consent. A plan was also developed on how to aid participants that were identified of needing acute

psychological help. The Hopkins Symptom Checklist-25 (Mollica et al. 1987) was used as a tool to screen participants' current mental health status. Any participants who expressed an interest in or were identified to be in need for psychological treatment were offered contact with a psychologist working with the target group on a voluntary basis who was available to the participants, regardless of asylum status.

ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

The interviews were transcribed by the first two authors in accordance with guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2013). A thematic analysis was conducted by the first two authors who followed the five-step approach (Braun & Clarke 2006) and utilised Nvivo version 11.4.2. After reading the entire data set, thoughts about initial codes and possible patterns were discussed before the coding began. Initially, codes were intended to summarise the statements made by respondents into descriptive categories. The authors proceeded by coding the interviews that had been conducted by the other author. Upon completion of initial coding, the authors had separately generated two code sets. The next step involved comparing and revising the initial codes, as well as grouping the codes into clusters (Braun & Clarke 2006). In comparing the two code sets, some codes were found to be identical, some codes had identical meanings but had slightly differing names and some codes had different names but were found to identify similar concepts (e.g. 'health issues' and 'effects of physical abuse'). Such codes were combined and renamed. A few codes were found to be unique between the two code sets (e.g. one researcher had generated the code 'being surveilled', a concept that had been grouped into other codes by the other researcher). During the comparison and revision process, some new codes were also created. All revised and new codes were then applied to the entire data set. During the grouping process, the authors discussed potential relationships between clusters and how they could be combined into themes. Six candidate themes were conceptualised; these were then reviewed, compared and tested against each other. This involved re-reading themes in full to check for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Braun & Clarke 2006). One theme was re-conceptualised as belonging to two of the other themes and approximately 10 codes were found to be extraneous to the research question, and were therefore discarded. Finally, themes were refined, sub-themes were defined and names were given to each theme and sub-themes.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the interviews resulted in four themes, with two sub-themes altogether. The first two themes (*Concealing Identity in Response to Pervasive Oppression and Living in Suspension*) are chronological, and describe experiences pre- and post-migration, respectively. The last two themes (*Sources of External Support and Strength from Within*) and related sub-themes are not time-specific, as they were not found to be confined to either pre- or post-migration. Illustrative quotes within each theme have been edited for clarity and all respondents are referred to using pseudonyms.

THEME 1: CONCEALING IDENTITY IN RESPONSE TO PERVASIVE OPPRESSION

This theme encompasses pre-migration experiences. It describes a context of pervasive oppression in which the concealment of identity emerged as an adaptive response.

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Experiences of pervasive oppression

Oppression against participants prior to migration occurred on multiple, interlocking levels: on a societal level in the form of norms and laws; on a community level in the form of discrimination and abuse in school, workplace, places of worship and by the general public and on a private level in the form of threats and abuse by family. The severity of the oppression varied, ranging from harassment and threats to violent attacks, rape and murder attempts. A majority of participants came from countries with laws against same-sex sexual activity. They described witnessing public executions of suspected homosexuals, and the fear they experienced as a result. At times, punishment by death was not carried out as a function of the legal system, but was rather committed at the hands of other authorities or the public, as sanctioned by cultural norms. Rajab described both knowledge of and personally witnessing horrific and systemic acts of violence against SGM people.

> Rajab: I saw many people that were arrested and killed immediately in their house and nobody understood what happened. If they came out a little bit they were put somewhere and were killed by stone, and if you're arrested by IS or Talibans or some Al Qaeda group they push you from the top of buildings or they set you on fire [...], you don't have any rights at all.

For Rajab these public executions established and reenforced his lack of rights in society, and served as a constant reminder of the danger to his life.

In their daily lives, participants experienced discrimination and harassment at school and in the workplace when they were suspected of deviating from gender or sexuality norms. A feeling of being constantly surveilled by neighbours and members of the public was experienced as an unrelenting pressure. In some instances, rumours themselves were enough to justify shunning or physical attacks by the public. Some respondents reported public attacks so severe that they resulted in both near-death experiences and the murder of a partner. Within their families, participants experienced threats and beatings, sometimes from an early age.

Pressure to enter into heterosexual marriage, increasing with age, was a source of anxiety for many respondents, partly connected to the risk of not being able to perform convincingly as heterosexuals after entering into marriage. Another coercive measure described by participants was being sent by their families to traditional or religious officiates, where they endured ritualised beatings and torture to expel the 'evil' source of their non-heterosexuality.

Concealing identity

Faced with widespread persecution and in constant fear of repercussions, the need to hide an important part of the self was most often described as an all-encompassing process that began in childhood and dominated their way of living. Hayyan described the widespread implications of this in his everyday life at pre-migration, and also how this was internalised and carried over into his life at post-migration.

> Hayyan: You can't make a phone call, you can't, others will hear you. You can't speak openly about anything to your friends who know that you are gay, and you can't wear some make up or a dress. I can't invite anyone to my home, it's totally out of the question, so I put on a mask. I came to Sweden just to remove it, but it's still a part of me.

Other specific examples of how participants concealed their identities included developing a 'straight-acting' appearance and behaviours, entering into opposite-sex relationships to deflect suspicion, avoiding contact with family, avoiding medical inspections to hide HIV status and hiding serious injuries after homophobic attacks. A state of constant vigilance and suspicion, driven by fear, was a part of concealment.

In spite of the dangers, descriptions of secret relationships and sexual encounters were common. These relationships were often rewarding experiences for participants, but were also marred by the pressure of maintaining secrecy within a climate of constant suspicion and threat. For several respondents, the sudden exposure of a secret same-sex relationship precipitated the chain of events that led to fleeing a country.

THEME 2: LIVING IN SUSPENSION

This theme contains participants' descriptions of post-migration hardships. Most respondents described the asylum process as lengthy, and as a period of being forced to wait helplessly for a life-altering decision. This time period was often described as psychologically strenuous and dominated by anxiety over an uncertain future. Respondents never knew when to expect the decision to come, resulting in a perceived time frame that could suddenly end tomorrow, but felt like it could go on forever.

Often, the respondents felt as though their sexuality was being disbelieved, and they found it difficult to understand what case workers were asking of them in order to prove their sexual orientations. One respondent, Mathews, felt that he was expected by the Migration Agency to signal his sexuality according to norms that may be applicable in Sweden but were foreign to him. Mathews: 'You understand, that [self-] expression, you cannot do that in Africa. [The] Immigration [Agency] wants Africans to behave like – it's not like that, a gay is a gay whether you paint yourself or not'.

This was also grounds for rejection for one respondent, Kimela, who according to the Migration Agency's rejection of her asylum claim had not 'expressed her inner feelings' convincingly. When trying to get a further explanation of what constituted 'inner feelings', Kimela was unable to obtain a clear answer.

Respondents described how practical constraints had negative impacts on their material and psychological well-being. Most respondents lived in state-run migration housing in various locations across Sweden and described several problems concerning housing, often stemming from other asylum seekers perceiving them as SGM. Problems included harassment as well as sexual, psychological and physical abuse. This often led to respondents isolating themselves or being segregated by staff in attempts to stop the abuse. Rajab described his experiences of being moved from camp to camp because of homophobic abuse, and how being isolated for his own protection felt like being imprisoned.

Another aspect of isolation was geographical, where respondents described small cities as isolating since they offered limited possibilities to find an LGBT community. Isolation also ran through respondents' descriptions of being unable to engage in daily life activities due to restrictions inherent to the asylum process. Participants described not being allowed to work without a permit, continue or finish previous studies or take Swedish classes.

Respondents used metaphors such as being chained, tied, psychologically bound, imprisoned or stuck to illustrate their feelings of being restricted. As asylum seekers, participants had restricted access to health care as they only had access

to emergency services, which for transgender asylum seekers entailed being denied gender-affirming treatment. Participants described problems with the ID card issued by the Migration Agency, which identified them as asylum seekers and were used against them to deny access to work, education and social venues. Hani described how his ID card stigmatised him.

> Hani: With education, finding a job, everything. When you are an asylum seeker it's not easy. If you have this kind of ID that means that they don't trust you, they're afraid, you know. Because they see you as a criminal.

While living in this state of limbo, respondents also described experiencing psychological distress caused by significant losses experienced over time from pre- to post-migration. Respondents felt sorrow at losing connections with family, friends and all of the people they had known in their home countries. Some respondents also reported having been disowned by their families as a result of their sexual identity being exposed. Respondents reflected upon the magnitude of what was lost, with the feeling that they had left their entire lives behind. While waiting in the asylum process with an uncertain future ahead, respondents described feeling like they were unable to take the time to resolve the grief they carried, which further hindered them from moving forward. One respondent, Layla, reflected on this, recalling the murder of a close friend at the hands of the police.

> Layla: She was killed in the police station out of torture and I thought, 'I have to move, I cannot stay in this country anymore' and this is actually why I left, because I lost her ((crying)). After she passed away I had to move and leave the country and I am moving from country to country. I didn't even have time to feel sad for her or grieve.

After years of accumulated stressors and continued uncertainty, Layla felt at times overwhelmed by the weight of carrying unprocessed experiences.

THEME 3: SOURCES OF EXTERNAL SUPPORT

This theme contains descriptions of material, interpersonal and environmental resilience factors that helped participants across time from pre- to post-migration. These factors were not found to be exclusive to either pre- or post-migration.

Monetary resources were often essential in order to undertake and prevail from pre- to post-migration; these were needed to acquire visas and plane tickets, pay smugglers and sustain participants over long periods of travel. Material resources were often obtained through the help of a key figure, a trusted person who helped to initiate escape. Key figures also emerged at post-migration, for example in the form of relatives in Sweden who were able to offer support. In the face of depleting resources, respondents described friends having been another important source of help.

A source of support that tended to emerge to a higher degree in the post-migration period was help from institutions and organisations. Some respondents described receiving practical and emotional help from religious institutions. Repeatedly, respondents mentioned the importance of LGBT community organisations. The LGBT community was described as filling the void of the 'family we lost before, because of our sexual orientation'.

Respondents also described feelings of inclusion and connectedness that stemmed from a perceived cultural openness to SGMs in the post-migration context. Hayyan

described how this perceived cultural openness reduced the loneliness caused by previous experiences of social exclusion.

> Hayyan: Swedish people are very nice and very kind to me. I feel more kindness and more support from them when they understand that I'm gay. That's a very good thing, that I feel happy and never feel alone. I feel that they are supporting me.

Beyond describing specific instances of receiving help or support, participants also reflected on the psychological importance of interpersonal support. Often, partners were described as very important and the love felt for them was a motivating factor that kept participants going through difficult times. Rajab described how his boyfriend was the only thing that gave him hope and filled his life with meaning after all the losses endured over time from pre- to post-migration.

> Rajab: The only hope that I have now is my life with my boyfriend. I live with him now; he is my life now and he is my hope. He makes me have a little hope in this life, otherwise my life would have no meaning for me.

Here, Rajab expresses the profound importance of his relationship while highlighting a scarcity of other sources of support.

THEME 4: STRENGTH FROM WITHIN

This theme contains descriptions of how participants dealt with adverse experiences and persevered through internal forms of resilience. These factors were not found to be exclusive to a specific period of time. The theme is divided into two sub-themes *Ways of Coping* and *Creating Meaning*.

Ways of Coping

Participants often described the importance of mindset in dealing with the hardships and psychological distress they experienced. Participants talked about visualising positive outcomes and trying to remain positive by imagining that others had it worse. Many respondents described strategies of trying to direct their focus to the present or the future while trying to forget the past. Another recurring strategy was for respondents to envision themselves as having gained strength from adversity, describing themselves as fighters. Others described fighting as something that was demanded of them in order to prevail. Hani: 'One thing I learned from these days and these years, is that you should fight for your value, you should fight all the time. If you stop fighting you lose yourself, that's what this time has taught me'.

Engaging in social activities, for example by meeting up with friends or going to events organised by LGBT community organisations, was described by participants as a way to minimise the psychological distress caused by memories of past traumatic experiences. Many also described taking on responsibility in LGBT community organisations and identified as activists, which was described as having a positive psychological impact. One respondent, Mirza, talked about his activism as a response to seeing images in the media of SGM people being abused globally. In response to seeing these images of abuse, Mirza felt a call to action. Mirza: 'I live here in Sweden, but I see all these pictures and I get angry. I feel like I want to – we have to do something. I try to gather my friends here too; we can't just sit by and watch'.

However, even when employing these strategies to cope with their experiences, participants described the inherent strain in maintaining a positive, active, fighting spirit. Kimela, who strove to remain socially active in order to avoid being overwhelmed by distress, explained that she only 'pretended to be ok', and was unsure of her capacity to overcome her trauma.

Creating Meaning

Beyond the idea of having gained strength through adversity, respondents described the feeling of having changed in more far-reaching ways as a result of their experiences. Some respondents felt that they had attained a stronger sense of personal agency as a result of their experiences. Mathews characterised this as a deeper control of his thoughts, feelings and reactions, making him 'a better person'. For Layla, the feeling of personal agency was connected to moving from a position of extreme victimisation and helplessness to one where she could see herself as a strong person with the capacity to care for herself and others.

Although some respondents did not describe problems with self-acceptance due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, those participants who had previously struggled reported positive changes to their self-perception. These changes were connected to having positive same-sex sexual experiences and relationships and being in environments that were explicitly accepting of SGM people, where participants had the opportunity to 'be open' with others. For Hani affirmative experiences in the post-migration context enabled him to reassess his relationship with God.

> Hani: You shift your thinking; you don't think your God is your enemy [because of] your identity. You think God accepts you, loves you the way you are. It makes you more peaceful in mind and heart by accepting yourself more.

In reflecting upon their experiences from pre- to post-migration, some respondents made sense of their stories by finding meaning in their experiences. Participants spoke about believing in karma or the idea that 'things happen for a reason'. In these interpretations, the pain and hardships endured over time from pre- to post-migration were seen as worthwhile.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examined SGM refugees' experiences of resilience within the context of hardships, from pre- to post-migration. Neither hardships nor resilience factors were found to be confined to either the pre- or post-migration period. Rather than simply decreasing from pre- to post-migration, the type of stigma and discrimination respondents experienced was described as changing in a more complex manner over time and across contexts. Even though the severity of abuse and harassment respondents suffered as a result of belonging to a stigmatised sexual or gender minority decreased at post-migration, it did not necessarily cease. Respondents also described new stigmatised positions in a post-migration context, related to negative cultural attitudes towards asylum seekers and racialised minorities, a finding which has been reported in previous research (Gowin et al. 2017; Lee & Brotman 2011). Similarly, resilience factors were described at both pre- and post-migration, fluctuating alongside changing hardships. The adaptive strategy of concealing identity was described as essential to survival in the pre-migration

context; respondents reflected upon how these patterns of behaviour continued to impact them at post-migration. Though scarce, material and interpersonal resources were described as playing critical roles over time from pre- to post-migration. Internal resources, described in the theme *Strength from Within*, were likewise present across time and context. Internal resilience factors were being used to both cope with and re-conceptualise traumatic experience during the course of ongoing hardships and oppression. The findings contradict the tendency to locate trauma to the pre-migration context and resilience to the post-migration context, where there may be an underlying assumption that resilience emerges as hardships decrease.

In accordance with previous research, respondents in this study experienced abuse, oppression and the fear thereof that extended across private and public spheres of living (Alessi, Kahn & Chatterji 2016; Alessi, Kahn & Van Der Horn 2017; O'Flaherty & Fisher 2008; OHCHR 2011; Piwowarczyk, Fernandez & Sharma 2017). To survive in these circumstances, participants described comprehensive measures used to vigilantly conceal a major aspect of their identity. These efforts extended far beyond merely hiding specific sexual or gender non-conforming behaviours. In spite of this, respondents also reported pre-migration experiences of expressing their sexuality or gender identity, often in secret relationships. In relation to Windle's (2011) definition of resilience as 'effectively negotiating, adapting to or managing significant sources of stress or trauma', these practices of identity concealment can be seen as resilient. This illustrates the importance of understanding resilience within the context of hardship, as well as moving beyond conceptualisations of resilience that equate resilience with normative notions of 'positive' traits, processes or outcomes. These narratives of maintaining a heterosexual, cisgender façade while having limited, secretive SGM experiences do not match contemporary western expectations for homosexual development, where early experiences of shame and doubt are expected to lead to a 'coming out' process after which identity is expressed openly, and through public affiliation with LGBT venues, events and organisations (Berg & Millbank 2009). The survival strategy of concealing sexual orientation or gender identity is carried over through to post-migration. In the Swedish context, these lifelong efforts of concealment alongside parallel experiences of the secret expression of gender and sexuality clash with the Migration Agency's expectations of a narrative of a linear inner process that moves from shame to acceptance. Thus, a strategy that can be seen as resilient in the pre-migration context is connected to hardship at post-migration.

In concurrence with previous research, participants in this study felt the asylum process to be a source of emotional distress (Lee & Brotman 2011). Respondents reported feeling that their sexualities were being judged against unclear and inaccurate standards. While living at facilities provided by the Migration Agency, during the asylum process, respondents experienced homophobic and transphobic threats and violence, a problem that has been reported in both Sweden and internationally (Lee & Brotman 2011; Lukac 2017). Housing SGM asylum seekers together with a heterosexual majority was experienced as a continuation of the persecutory conditions that the respondents were forced to flee. In light of the previous and current findings, the practice of housing SGM asylum seekers in hostile conditions is a questionable one.

These extensive hardships form the conditions in which adaptation takes place. When external resources are constrained or limited, the few available sources of support can have critical importance. The external factors contributing to resilience described by respondents were both material and interpersonal in nature. Certain types of external support were described more often in relation to either pre- or post-migration, for

example, help from a key figure was often described in pre-migration reports, whereas help from an organisation was often described in the post-migration period. In spite of shifts in emphasis, most of the identified sources of external support were described at both pre- and post-migration. When theorising about post-migration resilience in migrant groups more broadly, family and co-cultural diasporic communities have been viewed as important supports to adaptation (Pickren 2014). These factors did not emerge in this study. Rather, post-migration community was described to be found and forged among other SGM people, in particular those with a shared experience of forced migration. In our study as well as in previous research, these connections were made in the context of LGBT organisations (Alessi 2016). Descriptions of participating in social events and activism are similar to the findings by Alessi (2016), where staying hopeful and positive, and engaging in formal activism or volunteering were reported as important sources of resilience. These activities may in turn widen the individual's network of resources. The significance of support from organisations as a source of external support needs to be understood within the context of hardship; lack of access to or exclusion from other forms of social and cultural support pushes SGM refugees to find and create alternatives.

Less attention has been paid to internal resilience factors in previous research on SGM refugees. The internal resilience factors described in Strength from Within consisted of both coping strategies that were employed by participants in specific situations as well as wider attempts to reflect upon and make sense of their life stories. The coping strategies identified were most often described in relation to negative internal processes; these were often ways in which participants attempted to mitigate feelings of anxiety, depression or the impacts of traumatic memories. As indicated by some respondents, it's unclear whether such coping strategies will continue to be helpful and sustainable over time. These strategies may be the best available responses in the context of multiple psychosocial stressors, internal distress and limited access to external resources such as professional support or social services. The descriptions included in the final sub-theme, Creating Meaning, though arguably also related to coping, were not connected to specific situations or difficulties. These were broader reflections made by participants about how their experiences over time from pre- to post-migration have changed how they perceive themselves and their reality. In describing positive ways in which they have changed as people and attributing meaning to their experiences, respondents may be reaffirming belief in their potential for positive development and belief in a world where living is worthwhile.

LIMITATIONS

This study has a number of limitations. A challenge in data collection was that the interviewers were limited to conducting interviews in English or Swedish, which were not the first languages of any of the respondents. Language barriers likely affected the degree of nuance in the narratives, and it would have been desirable to conduct the interviews in the respondents' first languages.

In this study, as well as many previous studies, participants were recruited through an LGBT community organisation, which likely influenced the way in which LGBT organisations were discussed in the interviews. This is a common approach, as it is difficult to conceive of alternative ways to safely and effectively recruit members of this vulnerable population. In this study, participants were predominantly gay cisgendered men; the limited representation of other SGM identities in the data could result in certain experiences being concealed or underemphasised in the data. This merits further research.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Rather than examining resilience as something separate from or in spite of hardship, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of resilience as adaptation in the context of hardship. The results indicate a complex interconnectedness between hardships and resilience which merits more in-depth exploration in further research. SGM refugees in Sweden report utilising limited external resources and employing considerable internal resources in order to navigate and survive in the face of hardships that carry over and shift across time. Long histories of pervasive abuse and alienation from family and continued abuse and social exclusion during resettlement are some significant hardships described in this study. The resilience described by respondents is strained at post-migration when SGM refugees are placed in dangerous conditions, with uncertain prospects for their futures. The continued hardships in the post-migration context underscore the need for the host country to actively seek to facilitate resilience of this group by insuring fair and efficient asylum procedures and by providing them with safe living spaces, and access to affirmative social and organisational contexts that bolster connectedness and healing.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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