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Truth, Trauma and Testimony
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Editor's note: This is the third in a series of working papers reflecting on aspects of therapeutic work with refugees and asylum seekers undertaken by therapists and others working for SOLACE, a regional organisation based in Leeds (www.solace-uk.org.uk), and others associated with it. The views expressed here are those of the author. Anyone working in this area is welcome to submit drafts of short papers (3000-5000 words) to the series editor at Gary.Craig@galtres8.co.uk.



Truth, Trauma and Testimony

Introduction

Since the 'refugee crisis' of 2015, when images of terrified people huddled in boats crossing dangerous seas appeared on television screens throughout the world, refugees have become much more visible to the public. In response to these images, clothes were donated and volunteers went to the 'jungle' in Calais and to makeshift refugee camps in Greece to offer support. Another response was to erect stronger barriers to discourage people from making those journeys. The consequence is that journeys to safety have become more precarious, and those who attempt to make them are increasingly labelled 'illegal migrants'. In the mean time, the global numbers of refugees are increasing. Currently there are 25 long-running conflicts in 21 different countries leading to displacement. Most displaced people will relocate within their own country or a neighbouring country, with a minority fleeing further afield. See <https://www.unhcr.org/ph/figures-at-a-glance> 2019.

At the time of writing, mention of refugees, asylum seekers, illegal immigrants and people traffickers are rarely out of the press. Despite this increasing visibility, what actually happens to those who flee to the UK for long-term safety remains largely hidden. The UK Home Office has been criticized for the handling of asylum cases and the current Secretary of State for the Home Office has described it as a broken system. According to a recent BBC report, the numbers of people waiting for a decision on their asylum application for more than six months has escalated <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-47006158>, At the end of September 2020, 60,548 people continue to wait for a decision on their initial asylum claim with 40,108 (76%) of those waiting for more than 6 months, which is an increase from 26,125 in 2019. <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/refugee-asylum-facts/top-10-facts-about-refugees-and-people-seeking-asylum/>.

While the blame for this backlog could be placed upon increasing numbers of asylum seekers or people smugglers, the reality is that the numbers of people seeking asylum in the UK are relatively small. For the past decade, the numbers of people coming to the UK to seek asylum tend to hover about the 30,000 mark, which is much lower than many other European countries.

In our experience, the reason for the high numbers of unresolved cases lies in the problematic decision-making process, which can subject people to years of uncertainty, destitution and separation from families left behind while they are obliged to seek yet further evidence of their persecution. Living in this limbo can result in increasing levels of desperation, despair, mental and physical health problems. By the time, they may be granted some form of status in five, ten or fifteen years, many will have lost their confidence, their occupational skills and years of face-to face-contact with their families, including their children.

Given the centrality of the decision-making process, this paper will discuss the problematic criteria utilized for making these decisions, and suggest how therapists and other mental health professionals can support asylum seekers to navigate this process more effectively.

The UK Asylum System

Despite the controversies around immigration and asylum, the UK continues to be a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention which offers sanctuary to those persecuted on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion (<https://www.unhcr.org/uk/1951-refugee-convention.html>). Thus, the Home Office is obliged to consider the claims of those who flee to the UK to assess whether they should be granted some form of protection on the grounds of asylum or human rights.

The asylum process begins with a screening interview with a Home Officer to determine whether there might be any validity to an asylum seeker's claim. If it is decided there is no basis for an asylum claim, then the individual or family may be sent to a detention centre for an expedited removal. If they are given permission to pursue asylum, then, since the 1999 Immigration Act, most will enter the asylum support service system (known as 'NASS') and be sent to an Initial Accommodation Centre. Later they will be dispersed throughout the UK, where they may not know anyone or be able to communicate due to language barriers. If all goes well, the asylum seeker should be able to access a legal aid solicitor and will attend an in-depth 'substantive' interview by a Home Office employee, which can last for 3 to 6 hours. They will need to pass the test of 'credibility' and to demonstrate a wellfounded fear of being persecuted.

It will include many detailed questions about where someone has come from, for example the name of their primary school or where their local hospital is located. While Home Office officials may refer to 'country guidance' they are not likely to have in depth knowledge of the social and political complexities of the context where the asylum seeker has come from. ([https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/country-policy-and-information-notes.](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/country-policy-and-information-notes)) These interviews often take place in an uncomfortable environment and have been described as 'notoriously hit and miss'. (Yeo 2020) Nevertheless, they can be crucial as information given later in the process which contradicts or amends information given here may be used by the Home Office to discredit the claim for asylum.

Telling the Truth

The determination of an asylum claim is based upon trying to find out if someone is telling the 'truth' based on guidance by the Home Office on conducting interviews. (See Asylum Policy Instruction, assessing credibility and refugee status, version 9, Home Office, 6 January 2015). It instructs them to look for evidence of the truth by obtaining very detailed accounts, as the assumption is that a general account is more likely to be fabricated. Similarly they are instructed to look for 'internal consistency', so questions may be repeated in various formats to see if the respondent answers differently, to 'catch them out'. Although the guidance recommends a more sensitive approach with consideration given to extenuating factors, in practice it falls far short as pointed out in the Freedom From Torture (FFT) 2019 report.

If the asylum seeker was fortunate to have obtained some 'documentary' evidence before fleeing, such as a warrant for their arrest or a hospital discharge summary following an attack, and managed to keep it safe during their journey, the likelihood of being believed is stronger. Unfortunately, most asylum seekers are focused upon fleeing the danger and don't consider the need to have such evidence. Consequently, most asylum seekers just have their story, and on the basis of their story and responses to the Home Officer's questions, a decision is made as to their 'credibility'. The FFT report about the UK Home Office decision-making process, which was developed by Freedom From Torture along with seven other refugee organisations based on an analysis of over 50 reports over a 15-year period concluded that:

The reports identified a striking convergence of views on the fundamental causes of poor decision-making, including: flawed credibility assessments; the unrealistic and unlawful evidential burden placed on applicants; a starting point of disbelief and a broader 'refusal culture' in the ethos of the Home Office; an inadequate learning culture and a lack of independent oversight. The list of failures is compounded by the failure or refusal of the Home Office to act on many of the recommendations made. The problems have therefore been recurrent and persistent. (FFT 2019: 6)

If the asylum seeker's claim was refused, then they would be given an opportunity to appeal the decision by going to an independent Asylum Tribunal. In principle, they can access a legal aid solicitor; however, due to the increasingly restrictive criteria for legal aid representation since 2005, they may not be entitled because of a failure to pass the 'merits' test. This test is dependent upon whether the solicitor believes that the candidate has a 50% chance or more of success. Further because of changes in the way legal firms are paid, there has been a 56% reduction in providers of legal aid service to refugees and asylum seekers (Refugee Action 2018).

If the asylum seeker does manage to get a solicitor and go to court, they will be represented by a barrister who is briefed by the solicitor. The Home Office barrister will attempt to defend the Home Office's decision on substantive issues but may also do so by undermining the asylum seekers' credibility. Through the witness statements and the interrogation, the judge will need to make a decision about the 'truth'. (for more information about the asylum process, see Right to Remain for their wonderful Right to Remain toolkit videos (<https://righttoremain.org.uk>) or Asylum Support Appeals Project ASAP).

While the means to deciding an asylum claim through the judicial processes is different in that arguments are presented for and against, the criteria for discerning the 'truth' is very similar. Padesky (2016: 246) points out that there are three sets of factors that immigration judges rely on when making asylum decisions.

The first set of factors consists of **internal inconsistencies** in the applicant's story, including inconsistent testimony during the hearing; inconsistencies between the applicant's testimony and declaration, and inconsistencies between the testimony and other prior statements.

The second set involves aspects of **the way the story was told**, including the applicant's demeanor and other concerns, such as whether the applicant's story was deemed to be "vague" or "implausible." The final set of factors includes anything **external** to the applicant's story, including inconsistencies between the story and other evidence as well as an applicant's failure to corroborate her claim (Ibid.)

It is clear that immigration judges use the same standards as Home Officers do to determine whether an asylum seeker is 'credible' and thereby worthy of protection. The asylum seeker's plight is thus very much dependent upon his or her story being believed and them deemed to be credible on the basis of no perceived inconsistencies.

Padesky concludes '...when immigration judges conclude an applicant is not credible, they **overwhelmingly** rely on inconsistencies within or among the various versions of the applicant's story, and especially inconsistencies between the testimony and declaration... (Op. Cit. 247).

So far this process may appear to be just and in line with time-honoured ways of dealing with legal matters in the UK justice system to uncover the 'truth' and make just decisions. Unfortunately, it contains a number of very significant flaws, which means that this process can inadvertently perpetuate injustice and and much unnecessary suffering. These processes can waste time and money at the expense of the state with much loss of human potential to contribute to society.

The Truth

While the 'truth' may appear obvious in some matters as in the case of the ownership of a particular object or having a particular characteristic like blue eyes, the modernist view of 'objective truth' has become a much more contested concept. There is an increasing awareness that your particular paradigm (Kuhn 1962), that is, your assumptions about life and the world will influence the questions you ask, how you interpret the data and the conclusions you draw. In more popular terms, there is an awareness that events are interpreted so that stories can be spun in particular ways to create the desired impression. Similarly if you want to dispute a story, you can undermine it as in President Trump's assertions about 'fake news'.

In the case of asylum seekers, their stories will be spun in particular ways by the questions their interrogators ask them and the response given to their answers. As noted earlier, there is evidence from Freedom From Torture that when asylum seekers begin to speak of their experiences of torture, that their interviewers often fail to apply the principles and standards for asylum interviews set out in policy guidance. They found evidence of poor questioning technique, prejudgment and a frequent failure to follow up a disclosure of torture appropriately by finding out more and informing claimants of the option to obtain therapeutic support or medical evidence to document their injuries. See [https://freedomfromtorturestories.contentfiles.net/media/documents/Beyond Belief report.pdf](https://freedomfromtorturestories.contentfiles.net/media/documents/Beyond_Belief_report.pdf).

Similarly many women who have experienced sexual violence will not disclose it because they are simply not asked or are asked in inappropriate circumstances, for example in the presence of a male interpreter (Herlihy and Turner 2013). Further complications may include not having the right interpreter for your country or region, for example you may be an Arabic speaker from the Middle East and not be able to understand the the Arabic interpreter from North Africa. The global and national context can influence how truth is perceived – thus if the Somali woman seeking asylum is assumed to be an illegal migrant coming for economic reasons or to make use of the NHS, the evidence that is deemed to support that will likely be foregrounded.

Memory and truth

Just as the concept of 'objective truth' has been contested, the notion that memory is like a video recording that can be retrieved at will, has also been undermined. In ordinary circumstances memory will have a narrative structure with a beginning, middle and end, however it has also become apparent that memory is not something we simply retrieve, but memory is a construct, which is likely to change as it is recounted. We are also aware that the circumstances and the psychological state of someone telling the story will impact the shape of it. So if you are in the pub with some friends for a jolly evening having a few drinks, you may emphasize certain entertaining or humorous aspects of the story while someone who is depressed will focus upon the negative aspects of an account (Levine 2015).

More recently, we have become aware that not all that we experience is remembered. Unless something is particularly emotionally significant or is something which occurs with regularity, it is not likely to be stored in our long-term memory or be easily retrievable. Further there are different kinds of memory such as procedural memories that become embodied when we learn such skills as driving a vehicle or declarative memory, whereby we try to remember facts for a test, which complicates matters yet further (Levine 2015; Van der Kolk 2015).

For those who seek asylum, autobiographical memory, that is the cumulative stories that make up our lives, is especially important. Over the past few decades, there has also been much neuro-scientific research about our internal functioning including the role of the different parts of our brain, the function of our nervous system, stress hormones and such things as 'mirror' neurons, to add to the complexity. This research however also sheds light on why the current asylum process so often fails asylum seekers by deeming them to lack credibility because of their seemingly contradictory or disjointed accounts of their lives (Herlihy and Turner 2013).

Trauma and Memory

Whilst it is generally recognized that stress may impact our memory negatively, traumatic memories are of a different order. When someone subjectively experiences his or herself in a life-threatening situation, a response is triggered in our brains and bodies to prepare ourselves for escape. If the escape is successful, we generally recalibrate within a few weeks and are left with some unpleasant memories in the past. If, however, someone was trapped and responded with a sense of 'helpless and horror', the memory is unlikely to be processed in the usual way and remains in a fragmented state. Thus the various memory components including the visual images, emotions, body sensations, thoughts and behaviours can be disconnected from each other and from their own consciousness (Levine 2015). Instead of a coherent memory of the traumatic event, the imprints are left behind out of conscious awareness in fragmented images or in a distorted sequence.

Any of these aspects can be triggered by an internal feeling state or an external stimulus, for example by hearing a loud bang, which may then draw the individual back into the traumatic event. These reliving experiences known as 'flashbacks' have long been recognized as a particularly disturbing consequence of trauma. While there are many other short- and long-term impacts of trauma, for the purpose of this paper, we will only focus upon the impact of trauma on memory.

It is very unlikely therefore that an asylum seeker will be able to provide a coherent and consistent account of their reasons for fleeing if they had been subjected to traumatic experiences. As trauma expert Bessell Vander Kolk states, 'trauma survivors have symptoms not memories' (2015).

Consequently, the questioning by a Home Officer or barrister about the circumstances of an asylum seeker's experiences can inadvertently trigger a range of trauma symptoms including flashbacks. Neuroimaging studies have demonstrated that during a flashback, the neocortex, the thinking part of the brain closes down as does the area of the brain known as 'Broca's area' which is connected to speech. The impact is that someone can be rendered speechless and unable to communicate coherently. As the very basis of an asylum claim is an assumption that people can reliably, consistently and accurately recall autobiographical memories (the latter defined as 'an explicit memory of an event that occurred in a specific time and place in one's personal past') (Herlihy et al. 2012), traumatized asylum seekers are at a distinct disadvantage as they are unlikely to reliably and clearly to express themselves.

An additional factor that needs to be acknowledged is that there are many cultural and gender-related factors which will impact upon someone's demeanour or presentation.

For example, many women come from cultural contexts where there is no gender equality and where their voices may not be respected. They may have been expected to be subservient to authority, especially male authority, thus they may not have the confidence to maintain eye contact or to speak up to correct a factual error or a miscommunication.

These non-western cultural modes of being and communication can be interpreted as further evidence of not being truthful. Similarly, such 'facts' as dates, times and places of events, may not be given the same attention as in western contexts. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore these issues further.

Research on Memory

Of the abundance of research regarding the elusive nature of memory, several relevant themes have emerged.

First, is that our recalled memories for significant events are likely to be retained, however peripheral details may not. As psychologist, Harry Van Belle (1997) states, '...the conclusion of all this research now appears to be that memory for essentials is quite reliable but memory for incidentals is frequently in error ... it is more accurate to speak of 'distorted' memories rather than of completely false or illusory memories. Thus someone who was living under constant threat, may be aware that authorities or gangs came to their door on a number of occasions but may not remember exactly when or the frequency or even the time of year. Certain features of an extreme event may be frozen in time and in someone's mind, but other features will not register. If someone is being questioned in a situation which is perceived as life-threatening, for example when being interviewed by a Home Officer, or speaking in court, then there is a high possibility it could trigger such high levels of anxiety, that the interviewee goes into 'fight, flight or freeze' mode. The limbic system of the brain takes over and the thinking brain, the neo-cortex, closes down. While being cross-examined, the individual may struggle to remember details and become even more anxious with repeated questioning. While someone is groping for 'the truth', they will appear to be hedging the truth. The conclusion that is likely to be drawn is that the individual has an ulterior motive to stay in the country and is therefore lying.

Secondly, as noted previously, memory tends to be reconstructed, which changes in the telling: thus the presence of inconsistencies is not necessarily an indicator of fabrication.

Thirdly, as trauma memories are stored differently in the brain, interrogating a trauma survivor is not an effective way to obtain the truth. The 'truth' can only be re-constructed in an atmosphere of safety with a trusted person as the fragments of trauma memory are gradually brought together and integrated. As trauma expert Van der Kolk states, 'when a trauma survivor can tell a coherent story, they have fully recovered' (2020).

Given the current understanding of the nature of memory including the impact of stress and trauma based on the past few decades of neuro-scientific research, it is clear that the current legal processes are not adequate for obtaining the truth of an asylum claim.

As Paskey summarises:

Trauma narratives tend to be fragmented and disjointed, both logically and chronologically. They may be lacking in detail, and the story will typically change over time, even with regard to critical details, as the survivor begins to heal. None of these things are a reliable measure of whether a survivor is truthful, and yet they are the very things an immigration judge will typically point to as evidence that an asylum seeker is not credible. Indeed, inconsistencies within and among various versions of an applicant's story are by far the most common factor cited by immigration judges when they make a negative credibility finding in an asylum case ... when the applicant is a trauma survivor and the only evidence is the applicant's story, aggressive cross-examination is more likely to obscure the truth than reveal it (2016: 462).

The result of this ineffective decision-making process is that asylum seekers may go in and out of the asylum system for a long time, which may include periods of destitution and detention. Often it isn't possible for the Home Office to return people to their country, so they continue to live in limbo for years. At Solace, we have clients who have been seeking asylum for up to 20 years. We are very aware of the enormous pressure this places upon their physical and mental health. The long-term impact of such stress and trauma can affect memory and concentration, bowels, joints, digestion, nervous and immune systems as well as generate chronic mental health problems of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Thus, contrary to popular belief that sick people come to the UK to access the health care system, my observations indicate that many come with hope and expectation of building a new life, but the grueling nature of moving in and out of the system exacts a very high price. For many individuals, their confidence, health and hope deteriorate while, as a country, as we lose the the benefits that they can contribute, and pay for it through prescribed medication.

How Mental Health Practitioners and Therapists can Help

As a specialist mental health service exclusively for refugees and asylum seekers, Solace has worked with hundreds of asylum seekers since it opened its doors in 2006.

Throughout this time, we have witnessed the struggles of many asylum seekers and watched their mental and physical health deteriorate as each refusal takes its toll. We have also learned through our therapeutic practice how we can help our clients to navigate the UK systems and enable them to develop resilience and cope with these pressures better as well. For many mental health providers or therapists, working with asylum seekers can be overwhelming (Boyles 2006) and can leave many feeling deskilled. The many disturbing accounts of persecution and exile along with the grinding and unpredictable nature of the asylum process can leave mental health professionals who are trying to support asylum seekers feeling overwhelmed and discouraged. What enables many therapists to continue is a strong commitment to social justice and the knowledge that their efforts can actually make a difference.

While we don't have exact statistics, at Solace we have probably worked with more than 2000 refugees and asylum seekers over the past 14 years and to our knowledge less than 10 cases including 2 families have been forcibly returned to the countries from which they had fled. There may have been more, however it has been our experience that when under threat of removal, many will make contact with Solace to ask for assistance. What we do know is that when asylum seekers are supported to navigate the system, helped with the provision of mental health reports, referred to supportive services and helped to access resources, they are much more likely to be granted protection and to rebuild their lives.

We want to share with our mental health colleagues some of our top tips on how they might also provide effective support in which ever context they find themselves working in.

First, it helps to prepare yourself to support asylum seekers by *acquiring knowledge*:

- Developing a good understanding of the refugee context and asylum process in the UK context. The City of Sanctuary website with the Mental Health Resource pack is a good place to start for an overview and up to date news. For information about the asylum process see Right to Remain for their wonderful videos and Right to Remain toolkit (<https://righttoremain.org.uk/>) as well as the Asylum Support Appeals Project (ASAP) (<http://www.asaproject.org/resources/reports.>)

- Developing some knowledge of the countries and contexts from which asylum seekers flee can be helpful to understand the clients with whom you work. You may find such resources as Human Rights Watch (<https://www.hrw.org/>) or Freedom House (www.freedomhouse.org.) helpful for an understanding of particular political and legal contexts. For a general understanding of the global situation with respect to refugees and asylum seekers, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) website may be useful (www.unhcr.org).
- Developing your knowledge of your local context including how to access any free local resources such as English classes and social prescribing, as well as any refugee support organisations.
- Grounding your therapeutic practice or mental health service within a systemic framework, informed by knowledge of the effects of trauma, acute and chronic stress along with knowledge and skills in good cross-cultural practice.

Secondly, with this knowledge you can help asylum seekers to develop more confidence to navigate the UK systems more effectively by accessing the right information and resources. It will also enhance your ability to work collaboratively with solicitors and colleagues in other refugee organisations.

Thirdly, by drawing upon your psychological knowledge, you can help asylum seekers to understand themselves and manage their psychological symptoms through psycho-education about the impact of trauma and stress. Many fear they are losing control or going crazy so understanding what is happening in their bodies, minds and emotions can reduce anxiety and be empowering.

Fourthly, in the safe space of the therapy room and a secure attachment relationship, our clients can begin to feel calmer and make sense of their experiences. In this context you may:



- Teach grounding and anxiety management strategies, which can be especially useful to help manage the anxiety of having to sign on at the Home Office, see solicitors, or go to court. These may include such strategies as belly breathing or muscle tensing exercises, carrying an object as an anchor, tapping, humming, thinking of a safe place or the use of smells or other cognitive or sensory-based resources. See Solace website (www.solace-uk.org.uk) for more resources.
- Co-construct a narrative from the 'inside out' in a carefully titrated way so the person seeking asylum feels understood and able to manage. When done safely, this will not re-traumatize them but can help prepare asylum seekers to talk about their story in a calmer and more coherent way. As legal reports focus upon the 'facts', a report which can describe someone's subjective experience can help to amplify their voice, which is why it is my practice to share the report with anyone I work with to get their feedback. If we have understood wrongly, we can be corrected. For many, this 'testimony' can be powerfully affirmative, and may be the first time they feel really understood.
- Along with this construction, mental health professionals can share their observations and draw upon any screening tools they may use in their service, for example the Core 10 or the impact of Events Scale (IES) to draw conclusions about someone's mental health issues and their current functioning. These reports or letters are not Medical Legal Reports (MLR), which are prepared by doctors and solicitors as such, however they can still provide a 'truthful testimony'. Within the context of such a report/letter, you can recommend that a MLR be obtained to document injuries or scarring or to confirm a psychiatric diagnosis, particularly if the constraints of your context do not permit the writing of detailed reports.

The first of two anonymised case examples are given to illustrate some of these factors.

Case Study 1

Henok, a young man of Eritrean and Ethiopian heritage fled to the UK at the age 17 from Addis Ababa. His Eritrean father had died when he was young, so he lived with his mother and elder brother in an area inhabited largely by Eritreans and other mixed families. Due to the conflict with Eritrea, the authorities used to come and harass the families in their locality. Without a regular breadwinner, life was very difficult so his elder brother left to fend for himself on the streets.

Some years later, Henok was arrested and forced to work in an agricultural labour camp until he was able to escape through careful planning. Despite being a minor upon arrival, he was treated as an adult, and spent most of his time destitute, leaving him extremely frustrated and angry. At Solace, Henok was helped through both talking therapy and body therapy as well as a preliminary torture screening which included documenting his scars, which no one had previously asked him about.

With this screening and a mental health report, he was referred to Freedom From Torture for a Medical Legal Report, which was used as a basis for a fresh claim. After being refused again without the right of appeal, the decision was successfully challenged and the Home Office eventually granted Henok refugee status. Having felt the loss of his family keenly, Henok is now working in construction and building a new life with his wife and young children.

While Therapists are not case workers or legal representatives, we can listen with a 'third ear' for anything our clients tell us which might suggest a way of obtaining evidence for a 'fresh claim'. For example, one Middle Eastern client told me that a friend of her husband who had helped them to escape had also been forced to flee and locate to a different country because the man she had been forced to marry at the age of 15 to be his third wife was determined to kill him as well. Subsequently, they were able to contact the friend who wrote a letter testifying to what had happened. In such a situation it is advisable to encourage your client to discuss this possible evidence with their solicitor or caseworker to see if it will be useful.

Lastly, therapists can actively prepare clients for interviews or for court in various ways:

- By discussing the key issues that the applicant wants to communicate, so that he or she is clear and prepared to say what is important. He or she may be advised to communicate with the solicitor or barrister about their concerns. They can be encouraged to ask for questions to be repeated or rephrased as needed or to stop the process if they don't believe the interpreter is accurately conveying what they have said.

- The confidence to speak can be enhanced through mental rehearsal with guided imagery, where in a deeply relaxed state, the seeker of asylum can visualize themselves speaking confidently and clearly to the judge. As 'demeanour' plays a significant role in the assessment of 'credibility', staying grounded and keeping your 'thinking brain' on line is vitally important. Other techniques such as trauma tapping or role playing can serve to strengthen these neural pathways.
- Any previous negative experience that may get in the way such as having been interrogated or interviewed in such a way that it was re-traumatising or going to court and feeling silenced can be processed by using such techniques as Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, Trauma Tapping (TTT) or the 'rewind' technique. In this way, traumatic stress is not so easily triggered, and asylum seekers can be more empowered to tell their story and answer questions.

Case Study 2

Joseph, a man in his early 30's from the Democratic Republic of the Congo had been arrested during anti-government demonstrations, severely beaten and imprisoned. He managed to escape while being transferred to another prison and fled to the UK, leaving his young wife and two children behind. When an attempt had been made to deport him, he was assaulted by a guard and subsequently sent to live in Leeds, where he was supported by a member of his community. He was highly disturbed when he came to Solace, especially by the experience of his attempted removal. He accessed talking therapy, and was helped to process his trauma using EMDR.

When he needed to go to court, he was highly anxious, fearful of being unable to speak as he had previous bad experiences in court. By processing his previous disturbing court experiences and strengthening his confidence he was able to express himself well. After 8 years of seeking asylum he and his wife were reunited, and his family has grown. Joseph is not only happy to support his family but he loves his work driving his taxi. He greets his passengers, by saying 'Welcome to my taxi, number one taxi driver at your service'; and he smiles broadly when he tells how all his passengers tip him, even the students.

- Before going to court, we as therapists can remind clients to use their calming and grounding strategies to remain in the present, and to request a break or a glass of water if they feel their anxiety levels escalating to the point they feel they may be triggered into fight, flight or freeze' mode.

There are no guarantees of success: however, by drawing on contemporary neuro-biological knowledge about stress and trauma, we can as therapists enable our clients to describe their experiences and handle questions more confidently. Even if the desired outcome is not forthcoming, it is of great significance for those seeking sanctuary that the truth of their story can be fully and justly disclosed.

Conclusion

Finally, whilst these measures can be very helpful, they do not address the need for a systemic overhaul of the decision-making process. The current Home Secretary recognizes that the process in place for dealing with asylum decisions is 'not fit for purpose', but the answer is not to banish asylum seekers to off shore islands or disused ships, but to develop a system which enables asylum seekers to be treated justly.

A system which is 'trauma'-informed is desperately needed. Perhaps it is time for therapists who understand the neuro-biological impact of stress and trauma to come together to share their knowledge and to challenge the Home Office to make decisions that are informed by well-recognized scientific information, rather than outdated and incorrect assumptions about truth and memory.

In the recent FFT report (2020) a powerful case was made for the reform of the asylum process and how the initial interview was conducted, which I would encourage all to read and to endorse. A suggestion has been made to include 'experts by experience', that is those who have been through the experience of seeking asylum to be included in the decision-making process, which I would also support as a positive step forward.

However, it is my conviction, that to be treated justly, a panel including those with psychological expertise, especially with respect to trauma, legal expertise and ethnographic expertise should consider the multiple aspects of the case, and to seek further knowledge if required. While this would require greater investment at the early stages of an asylum application, making well-founded decisions from the start would save an enormous amount of time and resources for the UK (given that a substantial proportion of refusals are overturned on appeal), but more than that it would alleviate much unnecessary suffering which the current asylum process perpetuates. As noted earlier, the inadequacy of this system with the huge cost to the quality of human lives has been documented repeatedly, therefore those of us who care about the mental health of people seeking asylum need to find a way to make our voices heard..

The Author: Anne Burghgraef is the Clinical Director of Solace, where she has had responsibility for developing Solace's therapeutic services for refugees and asylum seekers since it began in 2006.

An Invitation

In the light of the above we would like to invite all those therapists and other health practitioners who have worked with people seeking sanctuary whose mental health and wellbeing has been damaged by the exigencies of the asylum process to share their stories. Building on the excellent work of many refugee sector organisations calling for asylum reform, we can add our voices as ones who have walked intimately with those on the asylum path to testify to the 'truth' of life lived within the world of UK asylum. With a just system, therapists can then focus upon using their knowledge and skill to repair broken lives and promote human flourishing for all. Please contact anne@solace-uk.org.uk with any suggestions for developing this idea.

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