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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Collective resistance as a means to healing. A narrative participatory study with sexual minority refugee & asylum-seeking people

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## ABSTRACT

The number of people in exile is rising. Sexual and ethnic minority refugee and asylum-seeking people present with special needs. This study utilised a collective narrative participatory design to explore how storying collective ways of resisting the effects of trauma, amongst gay and lesbian forced migrant people of Black African and Asian backgrounds in an urban context (London, UK) can be constitutive of healing. To do this, purposeful sampling procedures were pursued. Data collection was through individual and group format story telling sessions. Both sessions were structured around a co-constructed metaphor 'Passport of Life'. Narrative analysis was employed to examine the data, co-shaped with participants. Findings indicate that participants' (collective) storytelling is crafted as a site for resistances to emerge and be re-affirmed. Resistance pathways are inextricably linked to participants' diverse subjectivities. Healing is constituted as a dynamic process, bound by narrated and physical configurations of spaces of togetherness, which have re-definitional, hope-inducing, and social justice properties. The results support the use of participatory and narrative means for expanding (untold) stories of overcoming and supporting opportunities for healing and redress amongst this population. Implications for policy making, research, and psychological practice are considered.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Sexual minority; asylum; refugee; resilience; trauma; clinical psychology

## Introduction

The number of people fleeing to reach safety is on the rise. As of the end of 2022, 108.4 million people have been forcibly displaced internationally (UNHCR, 2023). Amongst them, 35.3 million are refugees<sup>1</sup> and 5.4 million are seeking asylum (UNHCR, 2023). In the year ending March 2023 alone, the UK has recorded 75,492 applications for asylum (Home Office, 2023). Forcibly displaced people are fleeing precarious situations, including human rights abuses, life-threatening geopolitical conditions (Neumayer, 2005), torture, violence, and rape (Patel & Mahtani, 2007; Vu et al., 2014). Many have lost family members and supportive social structures that shield against further suffering and abuse at post-resettlement (Liebling, Burke, Goodman, & Zasada, 2014; UNHCR, 2003). These experiences have been associated with adverse psychosocial trajectories (Ao et al., 2016; Kien et al., 2018; Turrini et al., 2017).

Research on the issues affecting people, fleeing on the grounds of persecution due to their sexuality and gender, is sparse. At the time of publication, same-sex relationships are criminalised in

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70 countries (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, 2020), leading to forcible displacing of people. In 2021, there were 415 asylum applications in the UK that were based on sexual orientation (Home Office, 2022). Arguably, this population presents with needs that require special attention (Hopkinson et al., 2016), with the contextual reading of their intersectional identities through their journeys giving rise to unique trajectories of trauma.

Sexual minority displaced people's experience is fraught with persecution (Alessi et al., 2016). This is instigated by familial, community, and religious circles, and/or the state, and includes physical attacks, imprisonment, police harassment, the obstruction of access to adequate health care and education, sexual violence, torture, and death (Hopkinson et al., 2016; Miles, 2010; UNHCR, 2011). Acts of violence are fed by, and feed into, a discursive reality, which depicts same-sex attraction as abnormal, outcasted, and shameful (Georgis, 2013), replicating cultural and religious attitudes towards morality, gender, and sexual norms, in such ways that are detrimental to sexual minorities' survival (Alessi et al., 2016; Miles, 2010; Ombagi, 2019).

Persecution may result in self-preservation strategies such as 'covering', defined as one's act of concealing their sexual and gender identities (Yoshino, 2006). Covering also permeates the social system in such ways that any forms of social organisation, connectivity and solidarity are stunted (Amnesty International, 2008), resulting in distress, alongside the insidious erosion and erasure of affirmative contexts, for one to make sense of their forming sexual identities (Root, 1992).

Fleeing is often unplanned and precipitated by the threat of exposure, violence, and imminent arrest (Higgins & Butler, 2012; Pepper, 2005). Upon arrival to reception countries, sexual minority forcibly displaced people face similar hostility, violence, discrimination, impoverished housing facilities, destitution, constraints accessing healthcare, and have to navigate complex asylum procedures (Alessi et al., 2018). Crossing borders is often marked by state-induced homophobic abuse and financial destitution leading to sexual exploitation (Cowen et al., 2011; ORAM, 2011). Moreover, the absence of strong protection and care systems (Rumbach & Knight, 2014), alongside being held at detention centres, places this population at a greater risk of sexual violence (Tabak & Levitan, 2013). Through challenging dominant cultural practices (e.g. being unaccompanied by male figures), risk of harm may be amplified for lesbian and transgender women (ORAM, 2011; Shakhsari, 2014). In the UK, people suffer the burden of proving the genuineness of their sexuality in a 'forced coming out' process marked by intrusive questioning with re-traumatising effects (Lee & Brotman, 2011). Existing evidence suggests that legal systems and their representatives are prone to racist and homobitransphobic attitudes and jurisdiction biases based on stereotypical readings of western sexualities (Akin, 2019; UKLGIG, 2018). This leads to 'reverse covering' (Yoshino, 2006), suggesting that people are forced to represent their sexual and gender identities in ways which preserve the immutability and linearity assumptions of western thought (Dhoest, 2018), with potentially fatal repercussions for those who fail to embody normative constructions of gender, race, sexuality, and class (Lewis, 2014; Shakhsari, 2014). These dangers are particularly pronounced for bisexual and plurisexual people, whose stories are seen as unbelievable, as they challenge dominant monosexual depictions of sexualities (Marcus, 2018; Peyghambarzadeh, 2021). Being affected by both racialisation and biphobia, this community is subject to a double stigmatisation process, which can curb their visibility and social support structures (Castro & Carnassale, 2019).

### *Beyond resilience*

Better understanding forcibly displaced sexual minority people's trajectories of healing is fundamental to supporting wellbeing and better service provision. Existing literature has understood resilience as being enabled by both internal and external support systems. More specifically, it has been shown that hope, spirituality, social connections, and social, psychological, and legal aid, can facilitate resilience (Alessi, 2016; Logie et al., 2016). Similarly, Kahn et al. (2017) noted that the very process of forming safe and trustworthy connections with service providers could boost wellbeing. Nevertheless, considering this population's resilience only by means of their engagement with

services might be inadequate, given established barriers in help-seeking due to cultural and language constraints, stigma, fear, shame, alongside professionals' feeling deskilled in working with the multiple intersections present in an LGBTQIA+ forced migration context (Chávez, 2011; Reading & Rubin, 2011).

The valuable insights of extant literature presented may be thwarted by an individualistic and essentialist theorising of resilience, which fails to comment on sexual minority refugee and asylum-seeking people's own responses, whilst also neglecting the social capital and context-specific features of wellbeing, seen elsewhere as a source of empowerment and healing (Harvey, 1996). Research on the collective, context-specific, and action-based understanding of resilience pathways in this population is limited, with preliminary findings suggesting that bottom-up collective organisation is constitutive of survival (Fobear, 2017; Taracena, 2018). By emphasising the participatory nature of *resisting* (understood throughout this text as the agentic process of responding to the effects of trauma (Wade, 1997)), literature on collective empowerment suggests a common thread between upholding social justice and psychological wellness (Holland, 1992; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010).

Research has shown that people of Black and Asian backgrounds might experience additional impediments to accessing collective spaces in metropolitan contexts, due to the mutual workings of racism and homobitransphobia (Bhagat, 2018; Castro & Carnassale, 2019). Therefore, this study will specifically focus on Black and Asian LGBTQIA+ refugee and asylum-seeking people, under the assumption that their intersectional identities would have uniquely impacted on adopted ways of resistance. The present study aims to explore racialised LGBTQIA+ refugee and asylum-seeking people's experiences of collective resisting within the context of their journey into exile and beyond using narrative means. It also aspires to understand the merits of resisting in enabling healing following past and ongoing experiences of trauma and oppression amongst this population.

The opportunities of harnessing the power of collective resistance in transforming individual and collective distress belies the lack of awareness regarding its operationalisation. As little is still known about how to support this population (Kahn & Alessi, 2017), understanding experiences of collective resistance could provide psychological services with a bottom-up framework for ethically reaching out and meeting LGBTQIA+ forced migrant people's needs. The founded reluctance amongst this population to utilising mainstream support services (Reading & Rubin, 2011), alongside the likely rise in asylum claims based on LGBTQIA+ persecution following recent antigay legislations in some parts of the world (see (Jerving, 2023), deems such insights exigent. To our knowledge, no UK literature has investigated these issues yet.

## Materials and methods

A narrative methodology afforded an analysis of the collective stories of trauma and resisting, whilst grounding these onto the multiple individual subjectivities (Denborough, 2012). In conducting this research, we embraced the stance that the stories that racialised LGBTQIA+ refugee and asylum-seeking people tell are co-shaped by the cultural, societal and political forces with which they interact (Gergen, 1999). This stance would suit the overarching purpose of the study, of understanding stories of resistance beyond individualistic and teleological considerations, as inextricably linked to the assumptions, discourses, opportunities, and limitations that exist in the socio-political-cultural spheres.

In shaping the methodology, we drew guidance from collective narrative practice's 'Ten Themes' (Denborough, 2008). Methodological considerations were also embedded within a Participatory Action Research (PAR) ethos to ensure that the research would be constitutive of knowledge and action valuable to the community of interest (Kidd & Kral, 2005). Accordingly, participants were involved in the shaping of the focus of the research and processes followed. Nevertheless, given that the research formed part of the lead author's doctorate thesis, control of the analytic process was retained by the lead author.

**Table 1.** Participant demographics.

Chosen Pseudonym	Home Region	Status	Sexuality	Gender Identity
Kelvin	Africa	Refugee	Gay	Male(cisgender)
Stella	Africa	Asylum-seeking	Lesbian	Female(cisgender)
Dom	Asia	Asylum-seeking	Gay	Male(cisgender)
Kaba	Africa	Asylum-seeking	Lesbian	Female(cisgender)
Bobby	Asia	Asylum-seeking	Lesbian	Female(cisgender)

## Procedure

### Recruitment and participants

Purposeful sampling procedures were pursued through forming links with a charity supporting LGBTQIA+ forced migrant people. Suitable participants had to self-identify as LGBTQIA+; be of ethnic minority backgrounds; have refugee or asylee status, due to persecution based on their sexual identities or practices; and be fluent in English. Exclusion criteria comprised: non-identifying with any of the above categories; being underage; and having been denied asylum. Narrative research is often performed on a small dataset as the emphasis is on generating a rich and in depth analysis (Squire et al., 2014). Five people participated in the study (Table 1.); pseudonyms are used.

The use of the terms ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ in this text reflect the ways that participants experienced, defined, and expressed their gendered sexualities. Arguably, this language may not adequately account for the diversity of experiences within and outside western contexts (Barker, 2019; Ekine, 2013), albeit could be suggestive of the socio-politico-cultural forces that have shaped and continue to shape the construction of embodied sexual identities, such as colonialism and the asylum jurisdiction process.

Recruitment was heavily supported by the coordinator of the charity, who advertised the study and located suitable participants. This was in keeping with the British Psychological Society (2018) guidance on working with community organisations, which emphasises harnessing local expertise, so that any involvement or intervention feels organic and non-coercive. Ethical clearance was obtained by the University of East London (UEL) School of Psychology Ethics Committee.

### Data collection

Data collection commenced in June 2019 and concluded in December 2019. The initial stage entailed concerted efforts to building trusting working alliances with participants to attend to the power imbalance, mistrust, and the risk for re-traumatisation (Higgins & Butler, 2012). Participants were invited to engage in two pre-research collective discussion meetings. These were framed around dialogical ways of interacting and aimed at giving each person the chance to express their views on how storytelling-based research can best reflect their community’s needs and values and how these can be mirrored in the project (pre-research stage).

To support storytelling during the research stage, we co-developed a novel metaphor: ‘The Passport of Life’ (Figure 1). The metaphor reflected participants’ values, hopes, and dreams, and provided a structure to the narration of their preferred identities, allowing them to reclaim border crossings and constructions of identity and belonging. Locally-situated culturally-appropriate metaphors are often mobilised, in contexts of hardship, as vehicles offering possibilities for extending the narratives, to support the reclaiming of people’s lives from the effects of oppression (Denborough, 2008). Storytelling was organised in two stages, first individual then collective reflections. Due to her personal circumstances, Stella was not able to attend the collective reflections workshop.

## Analysis

Narrative analysis (NA) was employed to process the findings reflecting the centrality of narratives in this research. Data comprised participants’ stories audio-recorded during the two acts of storytelling

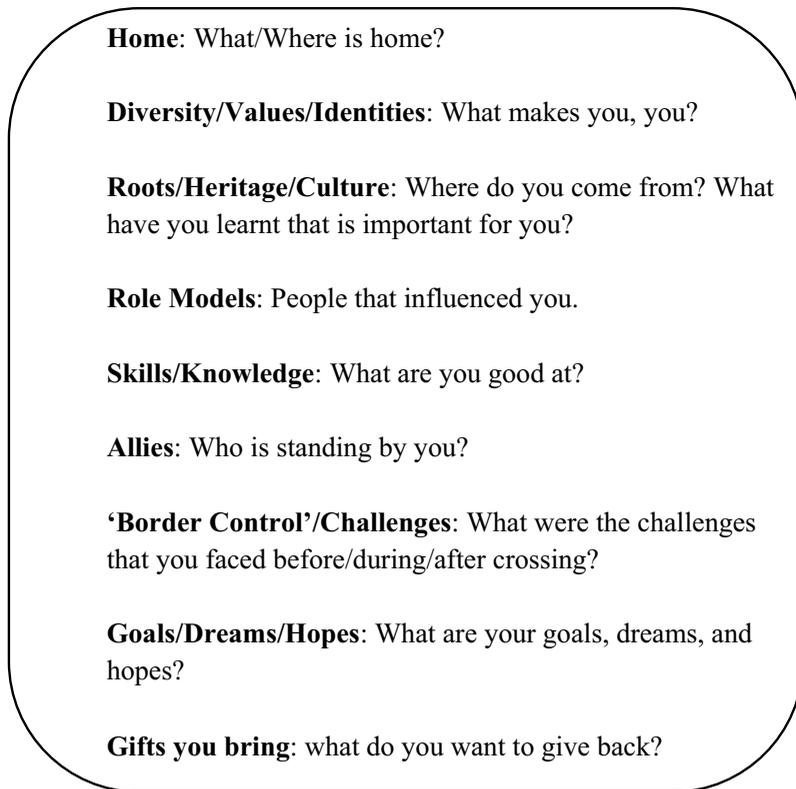


Figure 1. Passport of life.

(individual/collective) and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Conventions outlined by Poland (1995) were followed to ensure the trustworthiness of the transcription process. Aiming to stay true to the rich, idiosyncratic descriptions appropriated, which might be reflective of culturally specific ways of ascribing meaning, we have refrained from editing participants' language to suit English grammar and syntax conventions.

The analysis was grounded upon integrating two main axes. Firstly, attention was warranted to the *performance* and *performativity* of narratives (Squire et al., 2014), taking interest in how stories of resistance are performed and how dialogical transactions can crystallise and enrich the very act of resisting. The second analytic axis concerns the examination of the *contextual* positions that participants occupy, alongside the polyphonic<sup>2</sup> perspectives and stories that these constitute.

## Results

Through collective storytelling, individual narratives of crossing, movement, hardship, and overcoming are collectivised to reflect a community of humans striving to flow through time, space, structural, and discursive barriers. The very act of flowing forms an act of resistance within the context of the fixedness of borders and its figurative meaning, conveying an unequivocal message that 'we are humans; you also need to be heard and feel understood'[Kaba].

### *A story about 'othering'*

Participants' storied experiences shape ethnic and sexual minority refugee and asylee bodies as marginalised and devalued, which goes beyond their reaching 'safety' in the UK:

[Kelvin] Where I come from being a gay person is taken as a taboo, as an abomination.

[Stella] Because of fear. Because once you speak it [sexuality], you might get arrested and detained and end up in prison.

[Bobby] And you know in detention centres, gay people are not safe. You cannot tell that you are gay, because of other people who are in detention. They don't like you.

Sexuality is constructed as an unsafe context. Participants' sexual subjectivities are storied as 'devilish', criminal, abnormal, and shameful in the context of participants' countries of origin as well as during asylum-seeking (e.g. detention facilities). These trajectories produce silenced selves bound by fear and trepidation, unable to exist fully and freely.

However, collective storytelling is also registered here as a context which provides a corrective experience of togetherness, which in itself transforms fearful subjectivities into agentic actors, able to challenge such dehumanising discourses and practices through collective action. In Dom's narration, one can notice the juxtaposition of a disowned self, in the context of familial, legal, and cultural readings of participants' sexualities, and a self who belongs, through a re-owning process that happens through dialogue.

[Dom] I've been disowned by my family straight away when I've been caught. [...] So, there is still a lot of hatred, and of course as a group, as a community, we can raise this awareness, and we can change this. So, I know it's gonna be hard work, it's gonna be a lot to do, so together we can. And together we will!

In the western context, participants' stories are formed within a backdrop of dominant narratives that strip them of their agency to define their subjectivities in humanising ways. That is, that dominant constructions of refugee and asylum-seeking people from ethnic, in addition to sexual, minority backgrounds are performed in local contexts (e.g. border control) in such ways that reduce people to experiencing themselves as criminals and a threat. Nevertheless, participants' collective narration affords an opportunity to re-instate people's humanity by stressing people's resistances of the monolithic readings of their selfhoods:

[Kelvin] As long as you are from another country, which is not [...] westernised [...] they cannot trust you to be here. Yeah, especially at the border control, I have the worst experience. That guy implied [...] that you know you cannot just be allowed in here, maybe you are a terrorist.

[Kaba] the first thing is that coming from a black community or from Africa, you won't really know what is LGBT, because you are not really educated on that. [...] And we cannot be able to open up [...] Because the first person we did tell was actually a bad sign. [...] they say that [...] they don't see the fear in you. [...] they always put in front of you, like 'oh I think you are not telling the truth', 'I think where you are coming from [...] most people [...] nothing has happened to them. Why you be the only one?' [...] the government might still accept me, my sexuality, but as an individual your family might not [...]. The community might not. [...] You are still an outcast.

[Bobby] They ask, 'if you are a Muslim, you are praying, you are wearing a hijab how come you are a lesbian?' [...] I am an asylum-seeker, I don't have money, I don't drink alcohol, so what do I do? They want this type of evidence.

[Kaba] [...] And they push you so far to do these things and this leads to depression, [...] because you push yourself to do things that you are not able to afford, [...] to prove a point.

In the UK asylum process, (invisible) sexuality is read on the basis of visible ethnic, religious, and cultural differences. That is, as Kelvin's and Bobby's stories highlight, one's sexuality is seen through the prism of racial and ethnic dichotomies, rendering particular subjectivities trustworthy and desirable while others not. This process of othering is conducive to judging sexuality-based asylum claims under a normative gaze. Kaba's and Bobby's narrations are a testament to this, as sexual minority asylee people are pushed to confine their subjectivities within homonormative discourses. These privilege particular voices, which construct the 'genuine' gay and lesbian person as eager and open about their sexuality, persecuted by the state, educated about LGBTQIA+ matters, atheist, outgoing, damaged, and embodying stereotypical sexual minority characteristics. This overshadows participants' intersectional

individualities, as well as the structural inequalities that they face (racism, unemployment, destitution). For instance, authorities neglect to take into account participants' multi-layered experiences of rejection, which fails to acknowledge the importance of the collective identity in non-western contexts (someone being unsafe within their family). Othering also obscures the risks and ambivalence in the practice of coming out, which again privileges western assumptions.

The lack of an external polyphonic understanding of sexual minority asylee and refugee people's experience restricts one's inner polyphony, giving rise to constricted selfhood. Two aspects become salient in the above text, one constitutes people as fighters having to continually navigate an unjust system, pushing themselves through their limits, whilst the other shapes them as 'depressed', highlighting the onus of the process and the disempowerment that characterises this community's circumstances. It is interesting to notice how sexual minority asylee and refugee people's emotional positions are shaped through their narration and within such oppressive contexts. For example, Kaba's story of who gets to define one's emotional world, and its expression, is understood within a dominant discourse, picturing refugee people as afraid and damaged, in need of the help of a merciful West; reminiscent of racialised and post-colonialist discourses. This constrains nuanced understandings of people's emotional positions (being both strong and scared), reducing their storied selves to monolithic stereotypical categories that, failing to satisfy, can lead to disbelief and deportation.

In contrast, what is being performed through participants' narration is a racialised gay and lesbian refugee/asylee identity that is polyphonic in nature, contexts, and practice; but also, one that has been reduced, wronged, mislabelled, misjudged, racially abused, and devalued. In this context, participants' collective narration constitutes an act of collective resistance, being formed within a dominant place (to prove what the authorities want/need). It is also a marginal resistance, being articulated from an intersectional place of disadvantage.

### *The Story of 'Us'*

Participants respond to the structural and discursive adversities that they face through the construction of a collective identity. Collective subjectivities are founded upon mutual support, encouragement, and advice, in such ways that create purpose, hope, and direction:

[Kaba] What keeps me going is definitely hearing about someone like Kelvin, who has went through this process and [...] and he's still with us. [...] That means that us as a community, we still have Us!

[Dom][...] So, when you have [...] a whole community with you, standing by your side saying that 'yes, this person is this', of course there is something. [...] I think the thing which we are doing right now, [...] bringing what he thinks, what she thinks, what I think, I think together when we do this, make [...] impactful knowledge to let everybody know. Together we bring different ideas, different stories.

Kaba's story blurs the boundaries between two subjectivities. That is, 'having us', a form of positioning in a collective comradeship, becomes 'us', constituting a new form of collective existence. This type of existence is shaped through participants' speech as larger than its parts, leading to new forms of belonging. It also creates hope and acts as a psychological shield against the difficulties navigating the system. Interestingly, Dom's story constitutes individual existences as embedded within the collective identity. That is, that the collective identity provides space for individual subjectivities to be witnessed, acknowledged, defined, and socially validated to withstand public invalidation. Togetherness is constructed upon both a sense of being similar and different and, in so doing, it forms a subordinate narrative to the dominant normative monolithic discourse shaping ethnic and sexual minority asylee and refugee people's experiences in the UK. Finally, it is this collective existence that provides the context for collective acts of resistance:

[Kelvin] I think what can be changed is if we refugees, [...], we write our own stories, our narrative that is supposed to be [...] to create awareness [...] if you have more communities [...] to support us, to make our voices louder [...] it would really help. [...] if you have an ally in that category [politician], [...] they can revisit the laws [...]. And also, another ally we can make is the mainstream media. [...] If you make an ally, they can say something positive about us and make a difference.

[Kaba][. . .] it has to start from us! [. . .] When I heard about this project, 'oh how am I gonna do it?' I know it is the fear of the challenges we have had, being able to say these things over and over again. But we really need to persist on this, being able to share in this whole participation.

In the extract above, collective resistance is framed by means of social action, alongside a sharp grasp of the need for political and media allies to make changes at structural and societal levels. Participants' storytelling constructs the ethnic and sexual minority refugee and asylee person, within the context of a collective identity, as an agentic being who has the power to author their own stories, and form alliances to challenge some of the disadvantageous narratives that define the community. Social action creates a context for healing, which is fostered by a discursive redefinition of people's identities, reflecting and being reflected upon participants' authorship of their stories; this time under and for the public gaze. Participants are not coming from activist backgrounds, but through the collective narration activism emerges as a shared identity that provides hope and direction for change. It is therefore in the context of the collective narration that structural inequalities and oppressive practices get re-imagined and re-shaped, affording participants a more celebratory and agentic positioning. Nevertheless, participants' narratives strike a nuanced understanding between a positioning of a fighter and that of fear, in their context of exposure and re-iteration of traumatic experiences, the overcoming of which might be enabled from a place of collective existence and through participation. Queer narratives of vulnerability emerge here from an agentic place, as vulnerability gets to be defined by people's own articulation of their experiences.

### *Overcoming in context*

Collective storytelling is also constituted as a platform whereby local resistances can be noticed, performed, and celebrated. These resistances are shaped within and by participants' intersectional identities and rich backgrounds:

[Kelvin] It means being a strong person. Because, according to the history, being Black comes with its own challenges. Being gay also comes with its own challenges. So, I'm both Black and gay. And on top of that I am also African and coming from Africa comes with its own prejudices. So, I'm all three of those things and I'm still living,. [. . .] The first time I noticed this was when I started my journey for freedom.[. . .] I think my friends, my mentors, my advisors. Also, where I come from, they think I'm strong, because [. . .] I survived.

Kelvin's strength is grounded within the intersection of the collective historical struggles of Black, African, and gay communities. His narrative grounds his personal strength in the collective (the Black and gay communities have survived) context, the cementing of which happens through witnessing by other parties (mentor, friends, family). Moreover, Kelvin's strength becomes more noticeable through his journey (pragmatic context), as he overcomes physical, geographical and structural barriers.

[Dom][. . .] the thing which I learnt from my culture is being kind with everyone, being a strong man, spread love, [. . .]. And accept whatever you are. So, these [. . .] makes me strong and able to pass through all these situations which I've been through.

Dom also does not separate sexuality from his roots and heritage, constructing an idiosyncratic relationship with the culture in which he grew up, which forms the basis for past, present, and future resistances. The storying of cultural nuances shapes the platform whereby Dom reconciles rejection.

In both Kelvin's and Dom's narration, one may notice a heroic voice, shaped by the struggles that they have faced, but also by their racialised gendered gay identities. They both perform a view of masculinity that challenges the more stereotypically effeminate representations of gay men, constituting gender as a site whereby culture, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and border crossings are reconciled; albeit, through also reproducing gendered expectations related to a racialised diasporic masculine identity (see Carnassale, 2021).

[Kaba][. . .] if I think that He created everybody in life under the image of Himself so, it doesn't mean I'm different.

[Dom][. . .] so, in the darkness and loneliness I was only speaking with God. So, it was kind of a one-way talk and there was nothing in return, but there was still a little hope.

Kaba's and Dom's narration challenge normative assumptions about the incompatibility of religion and gay and lesbian sexualities. God is not constructed here as persecutory or reprimanding, but rather as an accepting figure that provides a refuge from solitude and exclusion. Through their dialogical transactions with God, Dom and Kaba shape a hopeful 'self' that survives.

## Discussion

This research explored how collective resistances can generate a process of healing in sexual minority forcibly displaced people. Participants resist contextual maltreatment and the misrepresentation of their storied subjectivities through both discursive and structural means. That is, through forming narrated and physical spaces of belonging in exile. Forms of resistance can be reviewed here under the collective umbrella, as, apart from the 'coming together' process, participants' stories are in constant dialogue with collective historical, cultural, and ancestral memories of survivorhood.

Participants' stories construct healing as an individual and collective process of becoming. Specifically, findings suggest that community formations afforded participants the right to live their sexuality openly away from socio-politico-cultural censorship. The creation of the liberated gay/lesbian survivors' identity can be understood from a sociological vantage point as mediated by the proliferation of sexual minority stories in modern western society (Plummer, 1995). This forms the foundation of the 'outing' process, rendering the open expression of queer sexuality as celebrated. From a psychological perspective, the act of togetherness creates a positive representation of minority sexualities in public spheres. As in Oliver (2002), the sexual minority 'self' is re-configured by affirming discursive practices, which in turn enables feeling safe in being accepted. This transaction between the psyche and the social can produce geographies of agentic resistances: the gay/lesbian outing against historic and present oppressive contexts.

Being part of the collective also accounts for multiple reformulations of subjectivities that deconstruct stereotypical views of participants' existences. Their narration creates healing through actively challenging the objectification of refugee and asylee bodies by social, cultural, and state actors (see Woolley, 2014), depicting people who dream, are skilled, miss, long, hope, and contribute. Thus, this research supports Logie et al. (2016) findings regarding the impact of social support on ethnic and sexual minority forced migrant people's positive identity construction, positing that self-redefinition happens through discursive means, also reflected on the collective level. As in Fobear (2017), collective re-authoring is replicated here as an act of political resistance against othering constructions. Those stories are not just abstract accounts, but saturated with affect; an embodied experience, yet ever-shifting and context-mediated.

Furthermore, collective spaces are transformed as sites of hopeful conversations. These are scaffolded upon a shared understanding of the new context and its challenges, suggesting, as in Kahn and colleagues (Kahn & Alessi, 2017) and Logie and colleagues (Logie et al., 2016), that information sharing can produce pathways of certainty and containment. We may view collective knowledge production as a form of empowerment in Foucauldian terms (1980), enabling participants to interrogate the representation of their multiple subjectivities in both asylum and refugee contexts, whilst learning to survive the system. Additionally, hope is shaped by processes of mutual encouragement and success witnessing, translating 'we can do it' into 'I can do it'. The present study extends Alessi's (2016) conclusions regarding the pivotal role of hope in facilitating wellbeing, enabling its conceptualisation within the tenets of social, discursive, and structural formations that carve it.

This reaffirmation of hope and (individual and collective) strength is registered against a backdrop of oppressive, racist, and marginalising practices, which create othering. As Puar (2007) observed, the continuous racialisation and sexualisation of non-western queer bodies reignites racist discursive and structural practices that render ethnic minority queer subjectivities as pervert, deceiving, and terrorist. The imprint of power here is, therefore, complex and much more pervasive, as it reflects inequalities grounded upon people's multiple social positions and not just their sexuality or gender. The temporality of rights and safety in exile (as in Winton, 2019), becomes clear in Kelvin's storytelling, which invites us to reflect on when/if people (ever) stop being treated as the 'other'. Thus, participants' public definition practices comprise resistance acts, as the claim 'I am queer' is read synonymously with the claims 'I am not a pervert', 'I can be Black and queer', 'I can be religious and queer'.

Participants story resistances as inseparable to their valued backgrounds; thus, reclaiming racialisation whilst challenging global narratives confining queer voices only within their White margins. As Ombagi (2019) suggests, participants' queer stories can be understood here as a form of reclaiming nationhood, challenging regional narratives that constitute queer folk as non-African or non-Asian and the reverse. Moreover, through storying a personal relationship with God – constructed here as the accepting Other (Oliver, 2002), which, substituting rejecting familial and societal contexts, offers permission to exist – participants dismantle heteronormative pre-conceptions of religion as a 'straight' space for pro-creation, alongside homonormative ideals that associate queerness with atheism (Ombagi, 2019). The integration of ethnic, religious, and queer identities is a site of strength and self-acceptance for participants in this study, upon which hope, courage, and survival skills are shaped and exercised.

Overall, this research has shown that forms of collective resistance can enable pathways of activism, which produces a grammar of collective strength. As in Watkins and Shulman (2008), healing is theorised here in the intersection between bottom-up empowerment and delivering on social justice. Acts of togetherness are *a priori* acts of resistance, as they defy socio-political-cultural processes, both in countries of origin and the UK, which deny any form of collective identification and public visibility (Bhagat, 2018; Woolley, 2014). The present study adds to international scholarship by placing healing at the epicentre of collective processes of resistance, suggesting that the former is not a by-product of the latter, but an active process of individual and collective empowerment constitutive of and constituted by collective belonging. Put differently, healing is not something that social support *does* to ethnic and sexual minority forcibly displaced people, rather it is bound by the very active process of coming together, which has re-definitional, hope-inducing, and social justice properties. Therefore, 'having us' (having support) is transformed to 'being us' (we are the support). Scaffolding a shared space, participants create what Erikson framed as 'emotional shelter' (1976, 240), so much so that it is through the collective that individual existences take shape, and the world is re-imagined as safe. Therefore, it is through collective narration that safety is constructed and, as in Fobear (2016), it is through the body that it is experienced.

Our research shows that language performs a pivotal role in creating togetherness and reconciling histories of oppression and marginalisation, offering a context of imaginative opportunity (hooks, 1990). That is, through storytelling participants engage(d) in transforming the past, present, whilst negotiating dreams and plans for action, such as educating others, strengthening community connections, challenging their misrepresentation by mainstream cultural agents. According to hooks (2000), oppressed people occupy a place of marginality, which offers opportunities for envisaging a new world order, as they negotiate crossings between margins and centre. Similarly, Ombagi (2019) talks about the power of queer Black people's narratives to challenge vestiges of western epistemological colonialism (i.e. immutability) and construct new meanings from an 'in-between' position. These resonate with findings here, suggesting that participants' resistance is formed from a place of marginality or in-between, both in terms of geo-political (in-between countries) and cultural references, as their voices get shut down, distorted, and undermined. Nevertheless, from a position of exclusion they construct a new equal world, based on universality and love.

## Limitations

The recruitment strategy employed in the study restricted participant involvement to a large city. Populations outside urban spaces may have reduced access to collective support due to the shortage of relevant organisations in suburban and rural areas (Keene & Greatrick, 2017), which may interfere with adopted resistance pathways. Additionally, recruitment was solely sought through a single charity and the process of identifying suitable participants was orchestrated by its coordinator, meaning that biases in the process may have been present. An effort was made, however, to include participants from different cultural, ethnic, sexual, and gender backgrounds to preserve richness and diversity.

An important consideration is the need to balance the cartography of participant's personal, ethnic, and cultural characteristics with important ethical considerations regarding anonymity, especially for participants whose determination of refugee status was underway at the time. This might have undermined the depth of the intersectional analysis, forging unrealistic notions of universality amongst African and Asian nations. Another limitation concerns the inability to capture the voices of transgender people and people with bisexual, fluid, and non-identified sexualities, despite attempts to recruit. Given the additional difficulties in establishing credibility and the rejection that bisexual and transgender people face also by their LGBTQIA+ community (Rehaag, 2008; Romero & Huerta, 2019), it is appropriate to assume that their storied subjectivities and survival trajectories might differ and thus this paper refers specifically to lesbian and gay experiences.

## Reflexivity

Here, we reflect on our intersectional contexts, as authors, to add context to our approach to the study and analysis. Our group includes people who are migrants and people who identify as sexual minorities. Through the years, we have grown interested in considering why and how some identities are made possible and others not and how this can vary across contexts. We are also White. These intersections can introduce power imbalances that need to be thought about through a superordinate context to mitigate their impact. To this end, we have chosen to place this research within a human rights approach, inviting a moral positioning; seeing racialised LGBTQIA+ refugee and asylum-seeking people's crossings as a humanitarian issue.

Reflecting on the co-constructive and narrative nature of this project, we have become particularly interested in the function of the narratives within the participants-researcher interspace (Eastmond, 2007), wondering whether participants' story-telling echoed, amongst others, their agony to be believed, to be read as worthy, to be emancipated from oppression, and how these might have differed if narratives were received by alternative audiences. In response to these, we used the 'Passport of Life' as a means to centring participants' skills, knowledge, and authorship, hoping to enable more level and diffuse power interactions. Engaging with the community on a relational level, together crafting a research project that reflected their needs, and encouraging involvement, constituted additional actions taken to the above cause. Moreover, to evaluate the study's credibility, we concentrated on issues concerning the transparency, comprehensiveness, and coherence of the analytic approach (Lieblich et al., 1998; Riessman, 1993).

## Recommendations

This study's findings taken together with the international literature suggest several key implications for psychological theory, practice, and policy development. Our research suggests that individualised notions of trauma have limitations, as they neglect the community-level impact of suffering for ethnic and sexual minority forced migrant people (social agony). They are also limited by their narrow transcultural applicability and their privileging of individual pathology, directing attention away from the socio-political context of distress (Summerfield, 2002). Whilst a post-traumatic distress

approach might be of value, offering access to stabilising and integrative trauma-focused interventions (Herman, 1992), here we argue that the *'how'* should be as central as the *'what'* (Martín-Baró, 1994).

This research has shown that collective formations constitute discursive spaces for acceptance and self-discovery, or what Plummer defines as 're-birthing experience' (1995, 52), suggesting that conceptualising psychological safety promoting interventions in collective ways may be of value. This is especially important as aforementioned barriers might constrain the articulation of individualised referrals to national health services (Pollock et al., 2012). To this end, our research highlights the feasibility, acceptability, and benefits of the use of collective narrative participatory approaches in supporting this population's healing.

This study recommends the reclaiming of the term resistance – reflecting similar reclaiming processes in the re-authoring of participants' identities – as a location whereby responses to abuses and oppression can be validated and promoted as a means towards regaining agency. Resistance here is seen as an active way of *responding* to wrongdoing, to be celebrated and embraced. Thus, this research advocates for a more nuanced understanding of *resisting*, which should trigger a curious exploration of how affected people and communities respond to injustices that impact on their subjectivities – they always respond (Denborough, 2008) – so as to create space for stories of healing to emerge.

Perhaps most importantly, professionals should position themselves as the accepting 'Other' and practice affirmatively (Alessi et al., 2015). That is, *sharing our psyche*<sup>3</sup> with affected people and communities: opening up; being with; openly naming the systemic injustices that they have and continue to suffer; providing space to denounce oppressive and dehumanising practices; be mindful of and challenge our own assumptions of normality and compatible identities; reinforcing that people have a right to be equal and free; and be accepting. Therapists should also consider the complexities in involving interpreters, where appropriate, and ensure that appropriate pathways are considered to establish safety amongst all parties (BPS, 2008).

As Patel (2003) purports, human rights advocacy and policy development should be at the heart of any therapeutic engagement with refugee people, thus deconstructing reductionist notions of the remit of psychological practice. This could involve ensuring that policymaking reflects understandings of the impact of trauma on storytelling (Berg & Millbank, 2009; Brewin et al., 2016), and guard against stereotypical homonormative and heteronormative readings of sexuality and gender, as sanctioned by judicial procedures, which fail to map onto diverse lived experiences (Ekine, 2013). It would also be helpful to consider departing from emphasising credibility to embracing an idiosyncratic analysis of persecution as a means of granting protection (Rehaag, 2008). All policy development should be grounded upon a participatory ethos to ensure representation and collective action.

### Future research

Future researchers may wish to explore resistance pathways in bisexual and transgender people given their differing personal contexts. It might be helpful that future research explores how services can collaborate with charitable organisations to form healing networks for ethnic and sexual minority refugee and asylee communities.

### Conclusion

This collective narrative participatory study engaged with a community of sexual minority refugee and asylum-seeking people of Black African and Asian backgrounds to understand their trajectories of healing. Through storytelling, it showed how facilitating collective spaces of belonging might be an appropriate approach to promote bottom-up empowerment and foster healing. From a position of struggle, resistance, and individual and collective strength, participants in this study reminds us all that refugee stories are human stories. They are stories of longing, loving, and caring, stories of equality, belonging, safety, discovery, and growth. Refugee flow is human flow, constructed upon a universal need for freedom.

## Notes

1. This term is used here to refer to people who reside in international territory 'owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion' (UNHCR, 1951, p. 14). An asylum seeking person is conceptualised as a person who has fled their country of origin in pursuit of protection but whose 'refugee status' has not yet been granted (Castles, 2006).
2. Refers to Bakhtin's (1984) theorising of narratives as constituted by simultaneously present multiple and diverse voices and perspectives.
3. Used here based on its Greek etymology meaning soul, life, breath.

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