Beyond the dreaming spires:

understanding the propensity to cope among refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford.

“I took a bus one day and came to Oxford. I fell in love with University Parks. The parks reminded me of the mountains at home, somehow.”

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Abstract

Asylum seekers and refugees are one of the most demonised and marginalised social groups in our society. Perceptions of asylum seekers as ‘welfare seekers’ have become entrenched in public discourse. Rarely are the truths about what it means to seek sanctuary in the UK publically heard. Since 2000, individuals seeking asylum (who wish to be supported with accommodation) have become subject to compulsory dispersal to parts of the UK where there is disused housing stock. Furthermore, since 2002 asylum seekers have been prohibited from legally working.

Through primary research conducted with refugees and asylum seekers in Oxford, this dissertation examines the mechanisms that enable individuals to cope with the challenges of seeking asylum in light of contemporary UK immigration legislation. Given the absence of statutory housing provision in Oxford for asylum seekers, and in light of the prohibition of legal employment, the research provides an insight into the ways in which individuals find alternative ways to survive. I specifically examine the role that social networks play in sustaining resilience under these circumstances. The resilience and resourcefulness of individuals is starkly displayed in this research, and yet so too are the current stressors on the lives of refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford, which impede their best efforts to rebuild meaningful lives.

The research demonstrates that the concept of coping is indeed a complex one. The system has led to disempowerment and dependency (or perceived dependency), which asylum seekers resist or reject. Despite the agency and voice which the individuals I interviewed possess, and despite the extraordinary lengths that they go to in order to manage their experiences, my research supports the contention that the existing UK asylum system prohibits individuals seeking asylum from truly coping in a sustainable or healthy way.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation has been inspired by a dear friend and her experiences seeking sanctuary in the UK. I have been supported by many kind individuals along the way.

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## Contents

Abstract 2

Acknowledgements 3

Glossary of terms 6

1. Chapter One: Introduction 7
   1.1. Background 7
   1.2. Aim and objectives 7
   1.3. Scope 8
   1.4. Methodology 8
       1.4.1. Sampling 9
       1.4.2. Data collection methods 10
       1.4.3. Ethics 10
   1.5. Limitations 11
   1.6. Structure 12

2. Chapter Two: Background and Context 13
   2.2. Refugees and asylum seekers: legal distinctions 13
   2.3. Contemporary immigration and asylum discourse 13
   2.4. Immigration and asylum legislation and policies 14
       2.4.1. The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 14
       2.4.2. Dispersal 14
       2.4.3. Welfare provision 15
       2.4.4. Prohibition of employment 15
       2.4.5. Refused asylum seekers 15
   2.5. Oxford as a city of refuge 15
   2.6. Support services 16
       2.6.1. Voluntary sector support 16
       2.6.2. Community groups 16
   2.7. The impact of the existing financial climate 16

3. Chapter Three: Literature Review 18
   3.1. Introduction 18
   3.2. Applying the vulnerabilities and capacities analysis to a refugee context 18
   3.3. Pre-flight and post-flight stresses and perceptions of vulnerability 19
   3.4. The dominance of the trauma discourse and the concept of resilience 20
   3.5. Refugee acculturation 21
   3.6. The propensity to cope: a review of literature relating to the coping mechanisms of refugees and individuals seeking asylum in western European countries 21
       3.6.1. Housing 21
       3.6.2. Employment 22
       3.6.3. The importance of social networks 23
       3.6.4. Conclusions 24
4. Chapter Four: Research Findings and Discussion
   4.1. Introduction
      4.1.1. Demographics of the interviewees
      4.1.2. Data analysis methodology
   4.2. Housing and home
      4.2.1. Provision of accommodation through social networks
      4.2.2. Why do individuals decide to remain in Oxford?
   4.3. Employment
      4.3.1. Illegal employment
      4.3.2. Distress caused by the prohibition of employment
      4.3.3. Education in place of employment
      4.3.4. Social networks providing employment
   4.4. Social networks enabling individuals to cope
      4.4.1. Practical support provision
      4.4.2. Emotional support provision
   4.5. Perceived impact of government legislation and policies on the propensity to cope
      4.5.1. The waiting game
      4.5.2. Funding provision for legal aid
   4.6. The propensity to cope
      4.6.1. Resilience and resourcefulness
      4.6.2. When coping doesn’t exist

5. Chapter Five: Conclusions

References

Appendices

Appendix 1: Details of interviews with service providers
Appendix 2: Details of interviews with refugees and individuals seeking asylum
Appendix 3: Consent form: service providers
Appendix 4: Consent form: refugees and individuals seeking asylum
Appendix 5: Information sheet: service providers
Appendix 6: Information sheet: refugees and individuals seeking asylum
Appendix 7: Questions for service providers
Appendix 8: Questions for refugees and individuals seeking asylum
Appendix 9: Presentation of data analysis
Appendix 10: Statement of originality
Appendix 11: E1BE form for service provider interviews
Appendix 12: E1BE form for refugees and individuals seeking asylum interviews
# Glossary of terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAD</td>
<td>Adversity Activated Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>BID</td>
<td>Bail for Immigration Detainees</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESOL</td>
<td>English for Speakers of Other Languages</td>
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<tr>
<td>ILR</td>
<td>Indefinite Leave to Remain</td>
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<td>PTG</td>
<td>Post-Traumatic Growth</td>
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<td>RCGs</td>
<td>Refugee Community Groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>TLR</td>
<td>Temporary Leave to Remain</td>
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<tr>
<td>UASC</td>
<td>Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children</td>
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<tr>
<td>UKBA</td>
<td>United Kingdom Border Agency</td>
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<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees</td>
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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Background

There are forty three million refugees and internally displaced people in our world today (UNHCR, 2010). Owing to conflict and persecution, individuals, families and at times whole communities have been forced to leave their homes, livelihoods and often their loved ones in order to find safety across borders. Contrary to popular belief, three quarters of the world’s refugees seek sanctuary in a country neighbouring their own (ibid), with developing countries hosting four fifths of all refugees (Refugee Council, 2012a). Of the fifteen per cent of the world’s refugees who are ‘looked after’ by European countries, the UK is home to only two per cent (ibid). In 2010, there were just under 18,000 asylum applications made in the UK, the lowest figure in almost twenty years (Migration Observatory, 2011).

Despite this reality and at times irrespective of evidence of the persecution that people have endured and continue to endure in parts of the world today, refugees and individuals seeking asylum are frequently portrayed by the media as being undeserving of compassion and protection (McDonald, 2007). The term asylum, which once stood for sanctuary (The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1995) now carries with it a set of negative connotations.

Little is perhaps truly known about the experiences that have forced people to leave their homes in the hope of finding safety in another country. Nor could most of us probably imagine what it must feel like to live in exile from one’s homeland and to make sense of loss and change in a new and unfamiliar society.

The focus for this dissertation emerged after having spent several years volunteering for organisations that support refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Manchester and Oxford. Through friendships that formed with individuals seeking asylum – some of whom have been in the UK asylum system for more than ten years, I observed the ways in which these friends attempted to manage their situations, often with unimaginable resilience.

This dissertation seeks to give voice to individuals whose experiences are rarely heard within the mainstream public discourse on asylum. It is an attempt to contribute to a more informed understanding of the realities of what it means to cope as a refugee or individual seeking asylum in the UK today.

1.2 Aim and objectives

This dissertation endeavours to provide an insight into some of the coping mechanisms employed by refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford, specifically in relation to housing and income generation. Furthermore, it is an attempt to understand how contemporary UK asylum legislation and policies impact upon the propensity of individuals to cope. The objectives of this research are as follows:
To provide a more informed and nuanced understanding of both the formal and informal coping mechanisms of refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford, particularly in relation to housing and employment

To provide an insight into the complexities of resilience and coping mechanisms as experienced and told by refugees and individuals seeking asylum

To develop an understanding of the ways in which government legislation and policies and a reduction in formal support services are affecting the lives of refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford.

1.3 Scope

There is a need for the discourse surrounding refugee vulnerability to be balanced with an appreciation of the resilience and capacities of individuals seeking asylum (Ager, 1999). While a small body of work does exist in a European context that explores resilience and ways of coping (Duke, 1996; Korakć, 2003; Valtonen, 1994; Wahlbeck, 1996; Williams, 2006), there is relatively little academic literature in the contemporary UK context that has examined the mechanisms that refugees and individuals seeking asylum use in order to cope.

Furthermore, given the existing financial climate and a reduction in funding for voluntary organisations that provide support services to refugees and individuals seeking asylum, very little research exists that examines the propensity of individuals to cope in this environment.

1.4 Methodology

This research takes an inductive approach. I had no desire to start with a hypothesis, theory or set of assumptions. Mindful of what Malkki (1995, p.8) described as the ‘...universalization of the figure of the refugee’ within refugee literature, I wanted to ensure that my research allowed individuals to talk about their unique experiences as refugees or people seeking asylum in Oxford. Eastmond has argued that while involuntary movement causes loss and change, we cannot assume what those losses and changes might be, what they may mean, or how they may be best coped with (2007, p.4).

With this in mind, I wanted to use this research to gain a richer understanding of the differing realities and coping mechanisms used by refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford.

Primary research forms the basis of this study. I conducted nine in-depth semi-structured interviews with refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford. In addition, I conducted eleven key informant in-depth semi-structured interviews with service practitioners providing support to refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford.

Mindful of some of the methodological and ethical challenges that Jacobsen and Landau (2003) have identified as confronting social scientists conducting forced migration research, and aware of the way in which research that does not adequately address such issues is weakened (ibid), I have articulated the sampling techniques and data collection methods that I have employed in this research. Furthermore, I have considered and attempted to address important ethical issues.

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1 ‘Induction is the process of using evidence to formulate or reformulate a general idea.’ (Ragin and Amoroso, 2011, p.227).
1.4.1 Sampling

I used purposive\(^2\) and snowball\(^3\) sampling in order to carry out my research with refugees and individuals seeking asylum. Bernard (2006, p.191) states that there are several reasons why purposive sampling is useful, including when a researcher wishes to carry out research with hard-to-find populations. The stigmatization of certain populations can make such groups difficult to find if they are reclusive (ibid, p.192). The stigma that refugees and asylum seekers often experience makes it challenging to find individuals who are willing to talk about their experiences. Furthermore, individuals may fear being identified, or may understandably be reluctant to share with researchers (often strangers) personal information that relates to their past and present experiences.

Faced with these challenges, my existing networks in Oxford were integral in enabling me to identify possible respondents willing to be interviewed. Having worked for and volunteered with organisations providing support services to refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford, I was able to approach individuals that I knew. These included refugees, individuals seeking asylum and service providers. In some instances respondents suggested other people who I might wish to approach to interview and thus snowball sampling was also used.

Jacobsen and Landau (2003) argue that accessing refugee populations through snowball sampling is problematic both methodologically and ethically. Methodologically they argue that unlike in random sampling where everybody in the target population has an equal chance of being selected, snowball sampling draws people from a segment of the population, namely those who are linked to the organisation or individual at the centre of the snowball (ibid, p.196). From an ethical perspective they argue that snowball sampling can increase the risk of revealing information about individuals when explaining to respondents how contact information was obtained (ibid).

In order to address the issue of sample selection bias that Jacobsen and Landau raise, I contacted and spoke with representatives from ten different service providers that offer support to refugees and individuals seeking asylum.\(^4\) These included statutory service providers, refugee charities and organisations, and voluntary groups. Refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford access different support services depending on factors such as their asylum status, their gender or nationality, or their material and social needs. I have therefore attempted to minimise the risk of sample selection bias by interviewing a cross-section of refugee service providers who have access to very different refugee populations.

The representativeness of my data is of concern to me as a researcher (Ragin and Amoroso, 2011) and it must be acknowledged that given the small scale of this research it cannot and does not claim to be representative of all refugees and asylum seekers in Oxford. However, Rodgers asserts the value of small-scale and modest qualitative research conducted with forced migrants (2004, p.21) and Jacobsen and Landau argue that where little is known about a specific issue, research that has been gathered through a small number of interviews can reveal rich and useful information (2003, May (2001, p.95) defines purposive sampling as selecting people to be interviewed based upon a known characteristic.

\(^2\) May (2001, p.95) defines purposive sampling as selecting people to be interviewed based upon a known characteristic.

\(^3\) Snowball sampling is a system whereby initial contact is made with a member of the population being researched who then leads the researcher to other members of that same population (May, 2001, p.95).

\(^4\) A complete list of all the service providers and representatives that I spoke with and interviewed can be found in the Appendices of this document (p.41).
p.190). The ethical issue raised by Jacobsen and Landau in relation to snowball sampling will be addressed as part of wider ethical issues that I have considered.

1.4.2 Data collection methods

In order to ensure that my data was reliable and comparable, it was essential that my interviews followed a guide, containing a written set of questions and topics to be covered (Bernard, 2006, p.212). However, the questions were designed to allow for in-depth exploration. Ragin and Amoroso (2011, p.122) assert that in-depth interviewing focuses on the building of relationships. I considered this interviewing technique to be integral to my research given the sensitive nature of the information being asked of my respondents.

My approach was also informed by the work of Ann Oakley (1981) who is critical of traditional, prescriptive interviewing practices, which she argues are a one-way process devoid of social interaction. She asserts that:

...the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship (ibid, p.41).

Miller argues that the process of developing trust is essential for conducting effective research within communities. He asserts that while much of this process happens prior to the research being carried out, the way in which the interviewer behaves during the interview is just as important and impacts upon the information that is shared (2004, p.217). Oakley argues that personal involvement is the way in which people come to know one another and allow people into their lives (1981, p.58). In order to authentically understand the experiences and coping mechanisms of refugees and asylum seekers in Oxford, the approach described by Oakley and Miller has been essential.

1.4.3 Ethics

There were important ethical issues to consider when designing, planning and carrying out this research. I was mindful of Leaning who, describing research conducted with refugee populations, suggested: ‘It is hard to think of any other human setting in which the ethical burden of research is as great’ (2001, p.1433). It was of paramount importance to me that my research be conducted in a considerate and sensitive way. I wanted to ensure that the experience of taking part in the research would not compound the distress that interviewees may have faced in their home countries or in the UK.

Informed consent was sought by all individuals taking part in this research. Each interviewee was given a research information sheet and an informed consent form to sign. The details of both forms were discussed prior to the interviews commencing. It was made clear to interviewees that they would remain anonymous. Seventeen interviews were audio recorded (eleven interviews with service providers and six interviews with individuals seeking asylum or with leave to remain). The remaining three interviews were scribed. Information pertaining to anonymity and the use of audio

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5 Copies of my interview questions can be found in the Appendices of this document (pp.49-50).
6 Informed consent is the process followed to ensure that all participants are entering into the research voluntarily, fully informed and free to withdraw at any time (Ragin and Amoroso, 2011, p.227).
recording equipment was detailed on the informed consent form.\(^7\) Ethics approval was granted by my dissertation supervisor and the MA course leader prior to the commencement of this research.\(^8\)

I was aware that trust would likely be an issue for my interviewees, as well as concerns about how information gathered may be used (Mackenzie, McDowell and Pittaway, 2007). As a result of my experiences volunteering within the refugee sector in Oxford, I already had some established and trusted relationships with individuals. Miller argues that in order to gather meaningful data, time and energy must be invested in developing trusted relationships that will allow for interpersonal access and ‘backstage’ information to be shared (2004).\(^9\) While I have been acutely aware of issues concerning bias and objectivity, I do not think that meaningful research for this dissertation would have been possible without genuine pre-existing inter-personal relationships.

An issue of further concern to me was the potential vulnerability of individuals that I interviewed. I was conscious of the impact that research might have on individuals if evoking difficult memories or thoughts (Dyregrov, Dyregrov and Raundalen, 2000). While my research specifically focused on people’s experiences in Oxford, I was aware that these issues may be as difficult to talk about as those relating to pre-flight (which my research did not focus on). In order to minimise this risk, I only interviewed individuals who had fully consented to the interview, who understood what was and was not going to be asked, and who were genuinely happy to talk about their experiences. I have tried to ensure that my research has enabled individuals to be recognised as people with agency and voice (Eastmond, 2007), capable of making their own decisions.

Finally, in order to minimise the risk that Jacobsen and Landau (2003) identified with regards to snowball sampling, I asked individuals to first approach people that they had suggested to interview in order to provide the context of the research and request being made. This ensured that confidentiality and anonymity were maintained.

**1.5 Limitations**

The main limitation of this research is the number of refugees and individuals seeking asylum that I have been able to interview. I suspected that due to the precarious and demanding nature of seeking asylum and the difficulties that individuals have often experienced both prior to and during their time in the UK, it would be challenging to find respondents who would be willing to share their experiences with me. Therefore, the nine interviews that I conducted cannot and do not claim to be representative of the experiences of all refugees and asylum seekers in Oxford. Similarly, I was only able to interview a selection of the many individuals and representatives of organisations providing support to refugees and people seeking asylum in Oxford. The experiences and views of those individuals cannot necessarily be taken to represent the wider views of the organisations that they represent.

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\(^7\) Copies of the information sheets and informed consent forms can be found within the Appendices of this document (pp.43-48).

\(^8\) Signed copies of the research ethics forms (E1BE) can be found within the Appendices of this document (pp.56-57).

\(^9\) Miller uses Goffman’s (1959) metaphor of frontstage and backstage behaviour to illustrate the importance of developing relationships based on trust, which then allow for meaningful information to be shared, which would not be shared with outsiders (Miller, 2004, p.218).
Furthermore, due to restrictions relating to time, money and availability of interpreters, I was only able to conduct interviews with individuals who had a good level of English. This meant that I was not able to understand the ways in which the coping capacity of individuals with a low level of English may be affected.

While I have attempted to recognise the heterogeneity of refugees and individuals seeking asylum by interviewing both women and men of diverse ages, nationalities and backgrounds, and with differing asylum status, the challenges of interviewing a ‘hard to find’ population (Bernard, 2011) meant that I often went through known organisations and individuals in Oxford providing support to refugees and asylum seekers. One could argue that they may facilitate contact with individuals who they feel are appropriate. Coupled with the fact that some individuals seeking asylum may not be in the formal asylum system or accessing formal support, this research has therefore not been able to encompass the experiences of refugees and individuals seeking asylum in the broadest sense.

Despite these limitations, it is my hope that this dissertation meaningfully contributes to a more informed understanding of some of the coping strategies among refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford.

1.6 Structure

The remainder of this dissertation is divided into four chapters. **Chapter Two** establishes the context in which this research takes place. It provides an overview of contemporary UK asylum legislation and policies, including the policy of dispersal and welfare entitlements. It details voluntary and community sector support services available to refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford.

**Chapter Three** begins with a critical analysis of ‘the refugee experience’ discourse. I go on to examine the concept of vulnerabilities and capabilities, the trauma discourse and an emerging emphasis on resilience, and refugee acculturation. I then review an existing body of research that focuses on the coping mechanisms and resilience of refugees and individuals seeking asylum within a European context. Coping mechanisms specifically relating to housing, employment and social networks are examined. It is the review of this literature that is the essence of the chapter and which lays the foundations for my own research.

**Chapter Four** comprises of the presentation and discussion of findings from my primary research. The data analysis is presented as a thematic review.

**Chapter Five** presents the conclusions that can be drawn from this research and considers the ways in which the capacities of individuals to cope with the process of seeking asylum in the UK are impeded.
Chapter Two: Background and Context

2.1 The United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees

According to Article 1 (A) (2) of the United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees, a refugee is a person who:

Owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or owing to such a fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to return to it.

The 1951 Refugee Convention was created in the aftermath of World War II to govern the treatment of the millions of refugees who were displaced across Europe and the rest of the world (Refugee Council, 2012b). The Convention has been subject to only one amendment: the 1967 Protocol, which removed the geographical limitations contained within the 1951 Convention (UNHCR, 2011). As a signatory to the Convention, the United Kingdom has committed to give protection to individuals who have fled their countries owing to a fear, or as a result, of persecution (Liberty, 2012).

2.2 Refugees and asylum seekers: legal distinctions

Within contemporary UK asylum discourse, a distinction is made between refugees and asylum seekers (Fell and Hayes, 2007). Only those individuals who have successfully claimed asylum and have been recognised by the British government under the terms of the Convention are refugees in a legal sense (ibid, p.189). Individuals who wish to be recognised as refugees and who are in the process of seeking asylum (having made an application for protection) are considered to be asylum seekers (ibid).

2.3 Contemporary immigration and asylum discourse

During the last twenty years immigration has become one of the most politicised and divisive issues in the UK and other European countries (McDonald, 2007, p.49). McDonald argues that:

The integrity of the institution of asylum, and the legitimacy of asylum seekers, has been called into question since the early 1990s owing to growing numbers of claimants, who have frequently been represented by politicians and the media as welfare seekers (ibid).

McDonald asserts that this portrayal of individuals seeking asylum as “welfare seekers” has become entrenched in public discourse (ibid). This has arguably led to asylum seekers becoming one of the most demonised social groups in society. A series of laws have disentitled asylum seekers to the same welfare provision available to citizens and individuals with leave to remain (ibid). Additionally, contemporary policies have been introduced, which have included an increase in the use of detention while individuals’ asylum claims are processed and a reduction in the provision of legal aid available to individuals seeking asylum (ibid, p.50). As a result, the UK has become an increasingly

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10 The 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees was created to govern the treatment of refugees in Europe (Refugee Council, 2012b).
challenging environment in which to seek asylum. Given that this dissertation aspires to understand some of the ways in which individuals cope with the process of seeking asylum, it is necessary to overview contemporary immigration and asylum policies. These policies undoubtedly impact upon the experiences of individuals seeking asylum and their propensity to cope.

2.4 Immigration and asylum legislation and policies

2.4.1 The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999

The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 was the first major piece of immigration legislation to be introduced by the Labour government following their 1997 election victory (Fell and Hayes, 2007, p.129). Prior to the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, individuals seeking asylum in the UK were entitled to welfare provision and accommodation under the National Assistance Act 1948. The rise in the early 1990s of individuals arriving in the UK to seek asylum arguably led to a more turbulent policy environment (Zetter, Griffiths and Sigona, 2005) and resulted in the introduction of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. The act was designed to overhaul the inherited immigration system, which was characterised as being inefficient, with individuals often waiting several years for their cases to be resolved (The Guardian, 2009).

As part of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, separate welfare provision for individuals seeking asylum was introduced: 70 per cent that of standard income support subsistence (Fell and Hayes, 2007). Since 2000, Dispersal has been the main instrument by which to accommodate individuals seeking asylum until their cases have been resolved (Zetter, Griffiths and Sigona, 2005).

2.4.2 Dispersal

The dispersal system was set up to relieve housing pressure in London and parts of the South East of England (where many asylum seekers had previously settled) (Zetter, Griffiths and Sigona, 2005, p.171). Individuals are now supported with accommodation in the North West, the North East, the Midlands, Wales and Scotland (UKBA, 2012). Housing is provided on a ‘no choice’ basis (Fell and Hayes, 2007; UKBA 2012a).

The policy of dispersal has been criticised for failing to allow asylum communities to cluster together and thus be able to offer support to one another (Fell and Hayes, 2007). It is further argued that there is inadequate service provision in locations to which asylum seekers are dispersed and that the housing provision itself is inadequate (ibid). Despite claims that dispersal was designed to allow for better integration, individuals are often placed in areas where there is existing social deprivation. The prohibition of employment and the resultant isolation that is often experienced by individuals seeking asylum has impeded integration within host communities (ibid, p.78).

Given that Oxford is not a dispersal city, individuals seeking asylum over the age of 18 will not be provided with accommodation in Oxford, except in exceptional circumstances. Therefore adults in Oxford with an on-going asylum case, or for whom all appeal rights have been exhausted, but who choose to remain in Oxford, are not provided with statutory housing. These individuals are reliant on charitable or voluntary sector support, or support extended through social networks. Individuals whose cases are successful and who are granted leave to remain are then subject to the same procedures for social housing or privately rented accommodation as other Oxford residents.
2.4.3 Welfare provision

Individuals over the age of 18 seeking asylum in Oxford are generally entitled to subsistence support of £36.62 a week (UKBA, 2012a). Individuals may choose subsistence only support in order to not be subjected to dispersal (Citizens for Sanctuary, 2008). Individuals for whom all appeal rights have been exhausted (but who are not able or willing to return to their countries of origin) are not usually entitled to welfare support and are dependent on charitable organisations, friends or family. Bloch and Schuster (2002) argue that the reduction in statutory welfare provision has led to a dependence on refugee community groups (RCGs), non-statutory bodies such as churches, and charities.

2.4.4 Prohibition of employment

Since July 2002 individuals seeking asylum in the UK have been forbidden from engaging in all forms of employment (Fell and Hayes, 2007). Prior to this date, individuals who had not received a decision on their case within six months of their application being made were entitled to apply to the Home Office for permission to work (ibid, p.87). Despite Article 11 of Directive 2003/9/EC of the Council of the European Union, which states that applicants should be given access to the labour market if their cases have not been decided upon within one year and if the delay is not their fault, very few individuals now receive permission to work (ibid, p.88).

2.4.5 Refused asylum seekers

Individuals whose cases have been refused and for whom all appeal rights have been exhausted are granted a 21-day ‘grace’ period by the Home Office during which time they will continue to receive asylum support (Citizens for Sanctuary, 2008). After this period they become refused asylum seekers and lose any financial support and housing that they were receiving (Fell and Hayes, 2007).

Many refused asylum seekers find that they become destitute when statutory support ceases. Destitution is defined by the Concise Oxford Dictionary as... [being] ‘without food, shelter etc.; completely impoverished.’ In a broader sense it is defined as being without formal support mechanisms, or being reliant on family and support networks for accommodation and subsistence (Citizens for Sanctuary, 2008). It is unclear how many destitute asylum seekers there are in Oxford, or how individuals cope in such circumstances.

2.5 Oxford as a city of refuge

Historically and contemporarily Oxford is renowned as a city offering refuge. In the mid-1990s the refugee population in Oxford began to grow, partly influenced by the release of detainees from Campsfield Immigration Detention Centre, which opened in Oxfordshire in 1993 (Asylum Welcome, 2006).11 From 1999 onwards Kosovars, including a significant number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) from Kosovo, began arriving in Oxford seeking asylum (ibid). Despite Oxford having never been a dispersal city, it has continued to attract individuals seeking asylum. Recent research carried out by Refugee Resource (2012) estimates that there are approximately 3,000 asylum seekers and refugees living in Oxfordshire.

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11Campsfield Immigration Detention Centre is located in Kidlington, six miles from Oxford. Up to 216 male detainees are held there at any one time. Many are asylum seekers whose claims are being considered, or whose cases have been refused (Campaign to Close Campsfield, 2012).
2.6 Support services

There exists a wide range of voluntary organisations that provide support services for asylum seekers and refugees in Oxford. These include Refugee Resource, Asylum Welcome, Open Door, Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID), British Red Cross, St Francis House, Emmaus Oxford and The Children’s Society. There also exist a number of community groups, as well as broader organisations and institutions that provide support to refugees and individuals seeking asylum (e.g. local churches and mosques).

2.6.1 Voluntary sector support

Asylum Welcome provides a range of support services to refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford, including a signposting and information service, an education service, support for individuals held in detention at Campsfield, food provision for destitute asylum seekers and advocacy and media work intended to raise public awareness of asylum issues (Imaan, 2012). Refugee Resource provides a counselling and psychotherapy service, a mentoring and coaching programme, a women’s support group and a benefits advice clinic. The employment service that Refugee Resource used to provide is no longer operational as a result of loss of funding (Dhall, 2012). BID in Oxford provides support to assist the release of asylum seekers held in detention at Campsfield (BID, 2012). Open Door is an organisation that provides a once-a-week lunchtime drop-in for refugees and asylum seekers. As well as serving a hot meal, Open Door also provides a social space for people to meet and offers practical support.

Given the lack of statutory responsibility for housing individuals seeking asylum in Oxford, a number of organisations exist to provide accommodation (albeit on a very small scale). St Francis House offers accommodation to six male asylum seekers in Oxford. Emmaus Oxford provides accommodation for two asylum seekers. The British Red Cross in Thames Valley provides support to destitute asylum seekers, including the provision of vouchers, food and clothing, and, where possible, accommodation (though this is a limited service) (Koroma, 2012).

2.6.2 Community groups

There exist in Oxford an extensive number of communities that provide support to refugees and individuals seeking asylum. The scale of support given by these groups will be thoroughly discussed in Chapter Four.

2.7 The impact of the existing financial climate

As a result of the financial climate, organisations that provide support to refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford have experienced a reduction in funding. Asylum Welcome have lost £40,000 youth work funding, which prioritises the work being done with UASC who are not entitled to support through Oxford Social Services (Imaan, 2012). Refugee Resource no longer has funding for its employment service, which supported clients who have permission to work. Furthermore, the

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12 Social services are obliged to provide support to UASC in the town or city in which they first present. Therefore UASC who move from the place that they first present in, to Oxford are not entitled to social services support and are dependent on support from voluntary organisations, such as Asylum Welcome (Imaan, 2012).
organisation has been forced to reduce the number of counsellors providing therapeutic services to clients (from four part-time counsellors to two part-time counsellors) (Dhall, 2012).

In 2011 The Bridging Project; an educational advice and support service for young asylum seekers, refugees and migrants that enabled them to access mainstream education at Oxford and Cherwell Valley College, closed due to a loss of funding (Open Democracy, 2011). Furthermore, due to government funding cuts, Oxfordshire County Council’s Adult Learning Service no longer provides a full-time ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) programme. Therefore, there are no full-time ESOL beginners’ courses available in Oxford (Greenaway, 2012). These courses were typically accessed by refugees and individuals seeking asylum with low levels of English proficiency.

The closure of the Immigration Advisory Service and Refugee and Migrant Justice in 2011 and 2010 respectively, as the two largest providers of legal aid provision to asylum seekers and migrants, has further increased the vulnerability of asylum seekers (The Guardian, 2011) as it becomes increasingly hard to find good quality and affordable legal representation.
Chapter Three: Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

Writing in the first edition of the *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Roger Zetter (1988) argued that the term refugee ‘...constitutes one of the most powerful labels currently in the repertoire of humanitarian concern, national and international public policy, and social differentiation’ (p.1). He went on to suggest that the label ‘refugee’ stereotypes and institutionalises a status and imposes dependency upon the people to whom the label has been attributed (ibid). There has subsequently emerged a notion of ‘the refugee experience’ (Ager, 1999; Eastmond, 2007). Malkki asserts that this has essentialized refugees as one undifferentiated and universal category of people; failing to recognise the differences between people who become refugees, or the distinct historical and political conditions that have led to their displacement (1995, cited in Eastmond, 2007, p.4). Furthermore, this universalization of the lives and experiences of people seeking refuge has arguably led to an assumption that all refugees are ‘helpless’ (Harrell-Bond, 1986) and has reinforced a discourse of vulnerability (Ager, 1999).

While we must recognise the vulnerabilities that are often inherent in the lives of people who have been forcibly displaced, there is also a responsibility to recognise and acknowledge the resilience of refugees in responding to the challenges that they face (Ager, 1999). Eastmond argues that refugees are likely to be ‘...people with agency and voice’ (2007, p.4).

Given that this research seeks to authentically understand more about the coping mechanisms of refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford, it is necessary to discern the complex interplay between the vulnerabilities and capacities of refugees. To do this I will make reference to the work of Black (1994) who applied Anderson and Woodrow’s (1991) vulnerabilities and capacities analysis to a refugee context. From there I shall provide a brief critique of the trauma discourse, which enforced a notion of assumed vulnerability and has until recently, arguably undermined the concept of resilience.

I will then go on to examine a more contemporary understanding of vulnerabilities and capacities, one which recognises the resilience of refugee people, but that also examines the ways in which resilience and coping may be affected. To do this I will use Berry’s (1997) acculturation model. With this conceptual framework in place, I will review and analyse the existing body of literature pertaining to the coping mechanisms and experiences of refugees and individuals seeking asylum in western European countries.

3.2 Applying the vulnerabilities and capacities analysis to a refugee context

In order to apply the vulnerabilities and capacities analysis, it is first necessary to understand what we mean by the term ‘vulnerability.’ Black (1994) observes that there are two primary ways of defining vulnerability. There are vulnerable groups (e.g. the elderly) who are vulnerable by definition and for whom there is an implied dependency, and there are those individuals or groups whose vulnerability derives from circumstances external to them (p.361). For these individuals and groups there is interplay between their exposure to risk and their capacity to cope (ibid). Black asserts that while it could be argued that all refugees are vulnerable owing to the protection that they require
and as a result of the implication of the label ‘refugee’, it is necessary to look beyond this conception.

The vulnerability of refugees is influenced, Black argues, by individuals themselves and their relationship with the wider society (ibid). Although designed for use within a development context, Black applies Anderson and Woodrow’s (1991) vulnerabilities and capacities analysis to a refugee context. The analysis makes the distinction between a person’s vulnerabilities (e.g. poverty, gender) and their capacities (e.g. skills, ability to work). It recognises physical/material issues, social/organisational issues and motivational/attitudinal issues that impact upon a person or community’s vulnerabilities and capacities (Black, 1994).

I consider Anderson and Woodrow’s analysis to be particularly useful when considering the vulnerabilities and capacities of refugees, and the interplay between the two. If we apply this analysis to the experience of seeking asylum in the UK, we can start to understand that refugees’ vulnerabilities may be exacerbated by physical/material issues such as poor quality housing or the prohibition of employment, social/organisational issues such as isolation from the host community, or motivational/attitudinal issues such as (enforced) dependency (or at least perceived dependency). In parallel, refugees possess capacities (though these are not always widely recognised or respected). In the physical/material realm they may include skills that can be exchanged. In the social/organisational realm they may include family, friends or community networks that provide assistance and support. In the motivational/attitudinal realm they may include having a shared sense of purpose or history within their community (Anderson and Woodrow, 1998).

Vulnerabilities and capacities influence and impact upon each other. Anderson and Woodrow argue that in a development context, although vulnerabilities are most obvious in times of disaster, a capacities assessment is critical in order to deliver projects that will have a positive developmental impact (ibid, p.14). We could apply the same reasoning within a refugee context, seeking to recognise and enhance the capacities of refugees. However, the process of seeking asylum makes the realisation of capacities more challenging. This analysis provides a useful framework, given that my research seeks to understand how and whether the capacities and ways of coping for individuals are influenced by material, social and motivational vulnerabilities.

3.3 Pre-flight and post-flight stresses and perceptions of vulnerability

An assumption is often made that the experiences of refugees in their home countries are the source of the most significant present distress for individuals. However, Richman argues that current stressors such as loss and bereavement, poverty, housing difficulties and obstacles to integration are at least as important as past experiences of violence and torture in causing distress (Richman, 1998, p.179). This is a view shared by Summerfield (2001) who suggests that for some refugees distress may be caused by issues such as cultural alienation in the host society and loss of status. Harrell-Bond argues that there is a need for greater attention to be paid to the stress caused by the disempowering process of becoming a refugee. She cites a study conducted with Somalis in London, which found that rather than individuals’ experiences of war, torture or detention, insecure housing was the variable which predicted which refugees would report mental health problems (Dahoud and Pelosi, 1989; 1991, cited in Harrell-Bond, 1999, p.137).
This issue is of particular relevance to my research. Proper and appropriate support that helps individuals to deal with distressing or traumatic experiences in their home countries must be provided where it is sought. At the same time, we must recognize that the ways in which refugees and individuals seeking asylum are treated by the host society also play an integral role in causing or alleviating distress. These can affect the capacity of individuals to cope.

3.4 The dominance of the trauma discourse and the concept of resilience


Papadopoulos and Hilderbrand (1998, cited in Afuape, 2011, p.53) argue that positioning refugees within a ‘victim discourse’ overlooks their resilience. Afuape (2011) asserts that focusing on trauma diverts attention away from the social, cultural and political issues that form an integral part of refugees’ experiences (ibid, p.53). It is therefore important that we do not assume that all refugees are ‘traumatised’. Summerfield (2001) argues that in doing so we may impose a ‘sick role’ on individuals, which risks undermining their efforts to rebuild their lives and overlooks the agency with which people act (Eastmond 2005, cited in Eastmond 2007), which often demonstrates resilience.

Papadopoulos (2007) defines resilience as the ability of the body not to alter after being subjected to severe conditions. Afuape (2012) asserts that resilience can be described as an individual withstanding negative change following adversity and retaining positive qualities despite adversity. The work of Papadopoulos and Tedeschi and Calhoun goes further to suggest that some refugees become strengthened by exposure to adversity and that new qualities which individuals did not have, or did not know existed, emerge (Papadopoulos, 2004; 2006, Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996, cited by Afuape, 2012).

I would argue that to describe resilience as a ‘neutral’ response to adversity implies passivity and undermines the tenacity of individuals. Similarly, Afuape is critical of the term effects, arguing that it suggests a process that is passive and thus contributes towards a conception of fragility or vulnerability. She asserts that when a person experiences oppression or abuse, rather than acting with passivity, individuals often resist that experience (Afuape, 2011, p.36). Resistance then becomes a personal or collective response to what is happening, enacted with agency (Afuape, 2012).

Afuape’s work reminds us of the importance of looking at the differing ways in which individuals respond to adversity. This conceptual understanding of resilience and resistance is of value and relevance to my research. It is necessary to understand the complexity and diversity of ways of coping that refugees and individuals seeking asylum may employ in the face of adversity.

The decision to focus this dissertation on the influences of the “social worlds” of refugees and people seeking asylum is a deliberate one. Summerfield argues that ‘...the longer-term fortunes of the majority of today’s asylum seekers will depend primarily on what happens in their social, rather than in their mental, worlds (2001, p.162).
3.5 Refugee acculturation

In order to understand the ways in which refugees’ resilience and capacities to cope may be affected or influenced, it is useful to look more closely at the concept of acculturation. Doná defines acculturation as ‘…the process by which migrant groups adjust to being in contact with different cultures’ (1999, p.171). Doná refers to Berry’s acculturation framework, which is an attempt to systemise the process of acculturation and illustrate the factors that affect individuals’ adaptation (Berry, 1997, p.14). The process of acculturation is affected, he argues, by both individual and group level variables that exist prior to acculturation (pre-flight) and individual and group level variables that arise during the process of acculturation (ibid).

Doná suggests that adaptation (the ‘end point’ of acculturation) can result in greater stress because of issues such as language problems or unfamiliar societal norms, or enhancement in a person’s life owing to determinants such as new economic opportunities or political freedom. She goes on to suggest that the process of adaptation depends upon factors such as the coping strategies of individuals and the social support that is available to them, as well as the nature of the host society and societal attitudes towards refugees (1999, p.175). This framework is particularly relevant to my own research, which will seek to understand how the capacity of refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford is impacted by moderating factors during acculturation (Berry, 1997). It will assist in understanding whether and how the process of adaptation leads to increased stress for individuals, enhanced opportunities, or a combination of the two.

3.6 The propensity to cope: a review of literature relating to the coping mechanisms of refugees and individuals seeking asylum in western European countries.

The concept of ‘coping’ is a broad one. To cope is defined as 1) [to] deal effectively or contend successfully with a person or task 2) [to] manage successfully; deal with a situation or problem (Concise English Dictionary, 1995). It is impossible within this chapter to exhaustively analyse all of the many and varied ways in which refugees and individuals seeking asylum deal effectively with or manage the experiences, challenges and problems associated with the asylum process. Instead, what the remainder of this chapter seeks to explore are the ways in which refugees and individuals seeking asylum cope with the challenges related to housing and employment, focusing particularly on the role that social networks play in providing support (in addition to, or in the absence of formal support available). 13 It is important to understand both the ways in which individuals act with agency, as well as the ways in which attempts by refugees and individuals seeking asylum to cope are undermined or impeded.

3.6.1 Housing

Duke (1996) found in her research with refugees in the UK that the difficulties of finding suitable housing had a detrimental effect on other aspects of refugees’ lives such as enrolling for educational and training courses, securing employment and learning English (p.471). More than one quarter of the refugees that she interviewed had experienced homelessness at some point since their arrival in the UK. She found that many of the respondents were reliant on relatives and community members

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13 My research, although primarily focusing on these issues, will also allow for an exploration of how other issues impact upon the capacity of individuals to cope.
to house them. Not only did this result in severe overcrowding and increased pressure on households, but it also meant that individuals moved frequently from one household to the next, in order to reduce the burden on those providing help.

This reliance on relatives and community members to provide accommodation in the absence of any formal provision was also found to exist among refugees from the former Yugoslavia who had settled in Rome. Korač (2003) found that refugees she interviewed formed networks in order to help newly arrived refugees meet their immediate needs, including accommodation. The majority of refugees that Korač interviewed had found their first accommodation with and through known and unknown refugees from their home region, living in Italy. Shared accommodation with other refugees (or with Italians that they had met soon after arriving in Italy) became a common (p.403).

What this demonstrates is that where there is an absence of formal support to provide accommodation, familial or community networks become integral in providing housing, however temporary or precarious it may be. Contrary to stereotypes that abound with regards to the perceived dependency on the state of individuals seeking asylum, Duke and Korač’s research shows that individuals act with agency in order to pro-actively cope with the situations that they find themselves in. Yet despite the resilience of individuals that this research demonstrates, one must also question what impact this transitory way of living may have on the lives of people seeking asylum, for many of whom the loss of home will have surely already been painfully felt.

3.6.2 Employment

The issue of employment is arguably central to the capacity of refugees to cope. Summerfield asserts that ‘...work has always been central to the way that refugees resumed the everyday rhythms of life and re-established a viable social and family identity’ (2001, p.162). Smith (1992) argues that people who are unemployed experience anxiety, depression and poor self-esteem, and are more likely to commit suicide. Unemployment also leads to stigma and humiliation (ibid).

Valtonen (1994), whose research examined the conditions of the lives of Vietnamese refugees in Finland, found that forty per cent of respondents were unemployed. The enforced social isolation that resulted from being unemployed was as distressing to individuals as the lack of salary (p.70). A number of the employed women who Valtonen interviewed joined the workforce for social, as well as financial reasons, explaining that being at home caused loneliness and allowed for too much time to think. For these women, working was a way to actively participate in society. Valtonen’s study draws attention to the social aspects of employment and the opportunities that it gives people to engage in society in a meaningful way.

The literature also highlights the importance of existing social networks in finding employment. Duke (1996) found that her respondents relied heavily on social networks within their ethnic communities for employment. One third of the respondents that she interviewed who were employed had found their jobs through family, friends or community groups (ibid, p.471). Korač’s research (2003) with refugees from the former Yugoslavia living in Rome corroborates the importance of existing social networks. Many of the women that she interviewed used the contacts of other women from the region that had lived in Rome since the 1970s and 1980s to secure employment as live-in housekeepers or nannies. In parts of Birmingham and London, informal economic networks among
Somalis have enabled individuals to pool their resources and set up businesses in partnership with one another (Griffiths, 2003, cited in Zetter, Griffiths and Sigona, 2005).

While both Duke and Korač’s research demonstrates the agency with which people act in order to pro-actively manage the resettlement process, it also reveals issues for concern, too. Duke argued that by relying on informal networks refugees may end up in low-skilled and poorly paid positions, while Korač found that the women she interviewed who were working as live-in housekeepers described the experience as ‘prison-like.’ This perhaps demonstrates the complexity of coping and the choices that individuals are forced to make. It also raises the issue of increased vulnerability for those individuals who have no legal right to work, but who may be forced to work illegally out of necessity in order to cope (e.g. destitute asylum seekers). The risk of exploitation may be heightened for them.

It will be of value to understand the ways in which refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford cope (both socially and financially), depending on whether they have permission to work. My research seeks to understand more about the experiences of refugees in Oxford who have the legal permission to work, as well as the ways of coping for individuals who do not have status and are thus prohibited from working legally.

3.6.3 The importance of social networks

The importance and value of social networks in assisting refugees to manage the process of resettlement cannot be overstated. Williams (2006) spent three years conducting ethnographic fieldwork with refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. She found that rather than being dependent on the state, refugees ‘…endeavour to be social actors’ (p.865). Social networks were used to enable individuals to meet their practical and emotional needs. She found that knowledge sharing across the UK was used to help other refugees find out information such as where and how to access support services and where to live in the UK. Furthermore, she found that the advice of another refugee was nearly always favoured over advice from a formal service provider owing to a lack of trust. Consistent with Duke (1996) and Korač’s research (2003) these social networks (transnational as well as UK-based) also provided possible opportunities for employment.

Valtonen (1994) found that for the refugees she interviewed, the overwhelming nature of interactions with other refugees was that of friendship and responsibility. She found that informal social support systems acted as help mechanisms. As with Williams’ study, information exchange was a vital aspect of this support system (particularly for refugees with low level Finnish language ability), strengthening refugees’ access to social services. Practical assistance was provided in the same way. Valtonen found that individuals had been supported with accommodation through friends, sometimes for long periods of time. Corroborating Williams’ findings, help would be sought from friends before seeking official support and this would be provided unconditionally (ibid, p.74).

Korač (2003) found that due to a lack of formal assistance provided to refugees in Italy, refugee networks were established in order to enable individuals to meet their daily needs. She found that regardless of where refugees were from (within the former Yugoslavia) and in spite of differing political views, individuals would support one another simply because they needed each other’s help (ibid, p.411).
It is clear from the literature that informal support provided through social networks is an integral way in which refugees and individuals seeking asylum manage the process of resettlement. In the absence of any formal support provision these networks are crucial in supporting individuals to try and re-establish meaningful lives in another country. Furthermore, even where formal support is available, social networks appear to remain as valuable. Wahlbeck (1996) argues that the diasporic networks of refugees and the support that they provide within communities ought to be properly recognised and valued.

Duke (1996, p.476) argues that it would be difficult to see how many of the refugees that she interviewed would have been able to cope without the existing social networks and the support that they provide. The natural resilience and capabilities of refugees is perhaps no more evident than in Korač’s research (2003) with refugees in Rome who received no formal assistance and instead had developed their own survival strategies, largely through social networks (p.418).

3.7 Conclusions

The literature demonstrates the resilience of refugees and individuals seeking asylum, often in the most challenging of circumstances. The role that social networks play is clearly significant in enabling individuals to manage, especially in the absence of adequate, or non-existent, formal support. However, informal mechanisms of support should not replace formal support services, or absolve the state of its obligations and responsibilities; rather they ought to compliment them (Wahlbeck, 1996; Korać, 2003; Williams, 2006).

The literature shows that the ability to cope with and manage the experience of resettlement is clearly affected by issues such as housing and employment, but there are other, broader issues, too. Rees (2003) found that for women from East Timor seeking asylum in Australia the fear of living with the threat of removal, the length of time living with uncertainty (without status) and the experience of prolonged isolation, compounded the traumatic experiences that they had endured in East Timor. This was corroborated by Gorst-Unsworth and Goldenberg (1998) who found that social problems experienced by Iraqi refugees living in the UK were important determinants in depressive morbidity (ibid, p.90). The policies of host countries play a significant role in determining the capacity of individuals to cope.

While the resilience and capacities of refugees is evident, so too are the inherent vulnerabilities. What the literature demonstrates are the ways in which an individual’s capacity to cope are often determined by the level of formal and informal service provision and support. We must be mindful that there is now a changing political, social and financial landscape. The recession in the UK has led to significant funding cuts and this has impacted upon service provision available to refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford. It will be of value to understand how this has affected the vulnerabilities and capabilities of individuals and whether there is a greater reliance on informal coping mechanisms. The following chapter will present a thematic review of the findings from my primary research.
Chapter Four: Research Findings and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

4.1.1 Demographics of the interviewees

I carried out the primary research for this study by conducting semi-structured interviews with nine refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford. Of the nine interviewees, three were women and six were men. Eight countries were represented by the interviewees (Afghanistan, 1; Iran, 1; Iraq, 1; Kenya, 2; Somalia, 1; Syria, 1; Uganda, 1; undisclosed, 1). Of the nine interviewees, three have indefinite leave to remain, one has temporary leave to remain, three have British citizenship (after having been granted indefinite leave to remain) and two are refused asylum seekers.

4.1.2 Data analysis methodology

This research takes an inductive approach. Thomas argues that using an inductive approach allows for data to be condensed into a brief, summary format and enables clear links to be made between the research objectives and summary findings (2006, p.237). He asserts that in inductive analysis, concepts, themes and models emerge as a result of interpretations that are made by the researcher from the data (ibid, p.238). In contrast, deductive analysis involves a process by which the researcher sets out to test prior hypotheses, theories or assumptions (ibid, p.238).

Thomas makes the valuable point that ‘...in practice, many evaluation projects use both inductive and deductive analysis’ (ibid, p.238). It is the case that while my own research has not been guided by a pre-existing hypothesis or theory with regards to the coping mechanisms employed by refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford, I have been mindful of the findings from existing research that examines the coping mechanisms of asylum seekers and refugees, and of theoretical frameworks such as the vulnerabilities and capacities analysis and the refugee acculturation model.

I have used the process of inductive coding set out by Thomas (2006), which involves the close reading of interview transcripts and the creation of categories or themes. My primary research consists of five categories (each containing sub-categories), which have been organised thematically. Within the discussion of my findings for each category I have, where relevant, explored the theories relating to vulnerabilities and capacities, resilience and resistance, and acculturation. In doing this I have been able to examine if and how the issues raised within these frameworks and by these theories have impacted upon the capacity of individuals to cope. Furthermore, I have referred to the existing body of literature that I have reviewed in relation to ways of coping to examine whether my research corroborates existing findings, or whether it reveals any new or different insights.

The primary focus of my analysis is the data collected from the interviews that I conducted with refugees and individuals seeking asylum. I had initially intended to use both the data from individuals seeking asylum or with leave to remain and service providers equally. However, given the richness of the data gathered from individuals with leave to remain or seeking asylum, their insights and experiences form the basis of this chapter. I have thus attempted to give voice to individuals whose experiences are rarely heard. The insights and experiences of practitioners working to support refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford have been used to both inform some of
the content in Chapter Two and to support some of the testimonies shared by the individuals interviewed.

4.2 Housing and home

Of the nine individuals whom I interviewed, five are currently privately renting accommodation in Oxford, two individuals receive social housing, one individual is housed by a charitable organisation and one individual is currently destitute. Four of the nine interviewees have at some point during their asylum claim received statutory housing in Oxford, two of the interviewees have experienced destitution and one individual has been detained. The majority of individuals (seven of the nine interviewees) have been reliant on the support of their friends and social networks for accommodation at some point during the period of seeking asylum.

4.2.1 Provision of accommodation through social networks

The research revealed that informal social networks are the main way in which individuals with an on-going asylum claim or for whom all appeal rights have been exhausted, find housing or accommodation in Oxford. This support is mainly provided by communities in the city (e.g. refugee communities or settled communities), although support has also been extended by people that individuals met as a result of their asylum campaign.

Corroborating the findings of Duke’s research (1996), my research revealed that ‘sofa surfing’ was a common way in which individuals were accommodated. So as to lessen the burden on individuals providing support in this way, the interviewees reported moving frequently from one friend’s house to another, often arriving very late in an evening and leaving very early in a morning in order not to be perceived as an ‘imposition’ or ‘burdensome.’ Overcrowding was found to be particularly salient, with respondents revealing that it is not uncommon for three people to rent one room in a shared house. The research revealed that individuals who had some form of leave to remain would often provide accommodation to people who were still in the asylum system, or who were refused asylum seekers. One interviewee offered their reasons for helping in this way:

Someone said to me that I behave like somebody who has not received my status because I am always with the people; failed asylum seekers...and I say ‘lest I forget’ that I myself was in that same situation.

For one of the individuals that I interviewed who has leave to remain and had a council property, supporting destitute asylum seekers by allowing them to stay in his house led to his own destitution.

I lost my house. It was my fault; I knew what I was doing. The council said ‘this is the second time you have [nationality omitted to protect the interviewee’s identity] in your house.’ I said I couldn’t leave anybody homeless. I know why I lost my house. Too many [] in my house. I give my address for everybody. Nobody pays me. I buy food. More than twelve people living there – homeless.

There was a strong sense among the individuals that I interviewed that communities provide the ‘safety net’ in terms of accommodation provision and other material support, as well as emotional support. The strength of community ties exist beyond Oxford and appear to be transnational. It was deemed important to extend support to individuals whose families they may have known from their
countries of origin and who in fact they may have been supported by in the past. One interviewee described it as follows:

Now I stay with a friend and he has a council house. I stay for nearly six weeks. I said I was looking for a room and he said ‘why are you going to pay? I have a house and you can sleep in the living room.’ Before, his uncle lived in my house for three years. Now he has to have me.

Informal housing support was not only provided by the communities where people were from, but also by individuals in Oxford who are connected to the asylum system in some way e.g. campaigners. Two of the interviewees’ housing had been privately paid for by individuals who they had met while raising public awareness of their asylum cases. For one interviewee, their housing, legal representation and education had all been provided in this way.

There was a sense by the service providers that I interviewed that the informal support extended by communities is ‘soaking up’ most of the homelessness that would otherwise exist in Oxford (Dhall, 2012). This temporary and transient way of living also appeared to have impacted upon the quality of the lives of those whom I interviewed. Interviewees described some of the physical manifestations of this stress, which included disturbed sleep patterns, the fatigue of leaving friends’ houses early in the morning and returning late at night, the lack of privacy from having to share a room and the impact of hearing other people’s distress in the middle of the night.

4.2.2 Why do individuals decide to remain in Oxford?

Given that Oxford is not a dispersal city, I was particularly interested to understand why individuals remain in Oxford when no statutory housing is provided. Several interviewees described the racism and ignorance that they had personally experienced, or that their friends had experienced, in other parts of the UK. Individuals described the sense of community in Oxford and the positive effects of multiculturalism. There was a strong sense that given the international nature of Oxford it was somehow easier to ‘blend in.’ One of the starkest findings from my research was the sense of ‘home’ that interviewees felt in Oxford.

I took a bus one day and came to Oxford. I fell in love with University Parks. The parks reminded me of the mountains at home, somehow.

After coming from London to Oxford I started establishing a community here. I had friends, I had a church where I would go and it started feeling like home.

I think it’s the feeling of home. You are far from home and yet you still want to feel it. It’s still far but you want to have that feeling of identity, so when you see somebody when you are going shopping on the Cowley Road and you talk to them in your language and you buy something and then maybe somebody invites you for dinner…that is so fulfilling.

I was reminded of the work of Eastmond (2007, p.4) who argued that while involuntary movement entails loss and change, we cannot assume what those losses or changes might be, or how they may be best coped with. Given the losses experienced by the individuals I interviewed, including the loss of identity (“literally everything that makes you and that gives you identity is taken away”), I would argue that choosing to remain in Oxford, even when there is no formal housing support available, is a way in which individuals can in some way retain or regain a sense of identity, belonging or home,
through the strong communities that exist in the city. Furthermore, considering Anderson and Woodrow’s vulnerabilities and capacities analysis (1998), the shared sense of experience within a community appears from my research to support individuals to cope. One could also argue that remaining in (or returning to) Oxford is an act of resistance against the perceived oppressiveness of the dispersal system, which, in the experiences of the individuals I interviewed, placed them (or would place them) in a position of isolation and vulnerability.

4.3 Employment

Of the nine interviewees, seven now have some form of leave to remain and thus permission to work. Two of the interviewees are refused asylum seekers and are either working, or have worked, illegally. Of the seven interviewees with status, one individual also worked illegally during the time that their asylum application was on-going.

4.3.1 Illegal employment

Despite popular discourse presenting asylum seekers as ‘welfare seekers’ (McDonald, 2007), all nine of the individuals whom I interviewed expressed distress at this label and at not being allowed to work. For the three individuals who have at some point worked illegally, they made this difficult decision rather than accepting welfare support that they may have been eligible for. For two of the interviewees, illegal employment had been undertaken in order to afford to rent accommodation in Oxford. The necessity of working was evident in order to cope with day-to-day living, but so too was the distress caused by knowing that this was prohibited.

There is no other support. I found a job, I was working. I had to work for my life. There was nobody to look after me. You need money to live. You can’t just have the bread and water. It is not enough for your life. Of course I was worried because I knew that I was working illegally. I was thinking and worrying about what would happen to me if they caught me.

Yeah, I was working. I didn’t have any food to eat, I didn’t have any rent. They were not supporting me so the only option was to get a job. It’s quite frightening because the moment they catch you working…that is another case.

Corroborating both Duke’s (1996) and Korać’s (2003) findings, my research also revealed the exploitation that individuals working illegally are exposed to. While the practical skills that one interviewee has means that he has been able to secure regular work, his absence of papers means that he has also been vulnerable to exploitation.

I have to give a low price because I have to support myself in some way. I only work for cash. It is difficult but I am doing ok. People in this country use us very cheaply. We people in this country who do not have permission to work are working very hard and get very little money. In the newsagents I get less than the minimum wage.

4.3.2 Distress caused by the prohibition of employment

Four of the nine interviewees spoke explicitly about the mental distress of not being able to work. Three individuals described having experienced depression as a result of spending significant periods of time at home alone. One interviewee described the way in which being forbidden from working
impacted upon his ability to integrate into the host society, as well as the psychological impact of unemployment:

You cannot integrate [when you are not allowed to work]. You can’t just wake up one morning and say ‘I am going to integrate today.’ No, first of all you are depressed, you never slept last night. You have all thoughts in your mind. You feel that you are not even a human; you are worthless. You stay in the house. You find people talking to themselves and shouting at night. Banging walls. Oh my God, I can’t tell you the number of mad asylum seekers out there.

For those individuals who now have permission to work, it has provided them with a way to integrate and learn about the host community, make new friends and improve their English. Furthermore, employment has been an important way for individuals to keep busy and not have time to think or become depressed. As one interviewee described it: “You are too busy surviving.” However, this is not to say that concerns around employment automatically dissipate once an individual has permission to work. Three of the respondents spoke about the difficulties of securing professional employment that matched their skills and qualifications, with two of the respondents doing a range of unskilled jobs.

4.3.3 Education in place of employment

Four of the interviewees had used education in place of employment when they did not have permission to work. The most commonly cited reason for seeking out educational opportunities was as a way for individuals to keep busy and to fill their time. Interviewees had in the past benefitted from free ESOL provision, which had improved their levels of English proficiency and which had, in their opinion, enabled them to better integrate into the host society. Furthermore, they had taken advantage of free courses in maths and computer studies and one interviewee had received funding to undertake a certificate in counselling skills. Several interviewees spoke about the benefits of having learnt written, as well as spoken English, in reducing their dependency on others and increasing their autonomy (e.g. being able to read and understand the content of letters addressed to them).

Given the value of education, particularly in place of employment, the reduction in funding for ESOL provision was vocalised by both the individuals seeking asylum or with leave to remain, and service providers as being of serious concern. One of the interviewees described how education empowers individuals and enables integration. Taking educational opportunities away arguably impede acculturation as individuals’ contact with the host society is reduced (Doná, 1999).

4.3.4 Social networks providing employment

My research found that social networks are intrinsic to providing employment opportunities. Interviewees described communities providing cash-in-hand work to individuals without permission to work e.g. child-minding, car washing and hair braiding. It was not uncommon for individuals to move around the UK in order to take up opportunities for work where it could be provided. Applying Anderson and Woodrow’s vulnerabilities and capacities analysis, it became apparent that physical skills could be exchanged by individuals in order to cope day-to-day. For example, although individuals staying on the sofas of their friends could not contribute in a financial sense towards their keep, they could instead use their skills to provide domestic assistance in the home, such as cooking and child minding.
Strong community support was found to be vital in enabling individuals to cope. However, unlike Korać’s (2003) research, which found that support would be offered unconditionally simply because individuals needed one another’s help, this was not always the case for my interviewees. Not only were conflicts within communities alluded to, but for one interviewee, so too was exploitation:

I was working using somebody else’s name for £12.50 an hour, so I had to give him half the money. If I had permission, I could have the money for myself. He thought he was doing me a favour.

4.4 Social networks enabling individuals to cope

My research revealed that social networks provide an integral form of support to refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford, both in terms of accommodation provision and informal employment opportunities. However, the support provided to individuals extends much further. A broad distinction can be made between individual or community-based support and organisational support. Organisational support might not be considered a ‘social network’ as such, but for the individuals that I interviewed, Oxford-based organisations were deemed to be an essential part of their existing social networks. For a significant number of my interviewees, they played a vital role in enabling them to cope with the challenges of seeking asylum in Oxford.

4.4.1 Practical support provision

Individuals’ social networks were used to assist with financial and material support, as well as accommodation and employment provision. Five of the interviewees had received support of this nature. Common forms of support provided included the provision of food and clothing (described by one interviewee as ‘harambee’14), the sharing of addresses (for communication) in the absence of permanent housing, assistance in reading and understanding letters received from the authorities and, corroborating Williams’ (2006) findings, advice about who to seek formal support from and who could be trusted. While organisations in Oxford are clearly still providing significant practical support, there was a sense of ‘nostalgia’ from the individuals who I interviewed for an era that no longer exists (due to a reduction in funding), when a considerable amount of practical support was available. Interviewees described the support that they had once received from organisations, including money to cover travel expenses to Newport for asylum hearings, money to assist with bus fares to college and financial assistance for educational courses.

4.4.2 Emotional support provision

The emotional support that was provided by an individual’s social networks; both at an individual/community level and/or organisationally, was one of the most significant ways that emerged as enabling individuals to cope with the demands of seeking asylum. Unsurprisingly, the importance of friendships was talked about at length by all of the individuals I interviewed. The importance of meeting other people who had a shared experience was of therapeutic value, particularly for the women who I interviewed.

14 Harambee is a Swahili term meaning togetherness; it is a way of bringing items together (such as food and clothing) for an individual who is in need of support.
There are some activities like women’s groups whereby you meet different kinds of people. They share their stories and you know that you are not the only one with this kind of problem; there are others who it is more difficult for.

Two of the interviewees spoke candidly about the emotional support that they had received from friends and organisations and what their lives had been like before this support. One person described what may have happened to them had they not received this help.

Before I went to Refugee Resource if you could see me you would be like ‘this one is going to die.’ I never used to come out of the house. I never used to want to do anything. You would call me on the phone – I never used to pick calls. One time I tried to commit suicide. There were all of these things. The moment I got to Refugee Resource my life changed completely. I became somebody very different.

If it wasn’t for them [the friends] I would probably not be alive now. They used to do a lot. They provided financial support, emotional support; everything that I needed. They really helped a lot and I don’t know how I should thank them. I know that if it wasn’t for them I would have probably committed suicide.

The sense of ‘home’ that several of the interviewees felt in Oxford seemed to be partly as a result of the community and togetherness that has been created by communities and organisations in Oxford. There was a strong sense that this provided a way for individuals to cope not only with seeking asylum, but also with the feelings of change and loss as a result of living in exile from their home countries. Five of the interviewees had actively chosen to move to Oxford from other parts of the UK because of the emotional and social support that they had either previously experienced or had been told existed in the city. One interviewee spoke at length about the collectivist nature of society in African cultures and in comparison, the private and individualistic nature of UK society. For this individual, the unique way in which organisations in Oxford offer support gave them a memory of their culture and provided healing:

When you come here you find a very private society, which we are not used to. In Africa everybody says hi to each other. If you don’t have food you go to the neighbour and share the food you have…there is nothing like ownership…everything you share. So the organisations provide a comfort. I remember going to some of these drop-in places, for example. You go home feeling like you’ve just had a taste of Africa…it is very healing.

4.5 Perceived impact of government policies and legislation on the propensity to cope

I was particularly interested to understand how the propensity of individuals to cope may be impacted by government policies and legislation, and how much they accounted for current stressors in my interviewees’ lives. It is impossible (due to the limitations of this dissertation) to discuss all of the many and varied ways in which the individuals who I interviewed described impediments to their coping. The overall consensus expressed by the interviewees was that the nature of the asylum system in the UK and the restrictions that it has placed on their lives compounds the distress caused by pre-flight experiences. While the support extended by communities and organisations clearly made a positive difference to their lives, it was felt by several of the interviewees that it could not bring about the real change that was needed.
What good is the emotional support when the cause of the distress is not being eliminated?

Everything will keep coming back around the table until you have permission to stay and permission to work. If you don’t have that, you have nothing.

4.5.1 The waiting game

The average length of time that it had taken respondents to receive a final decision on their asylum applications was 6.5 years, with one interviewee waiting twelve years to receive leave to remain. The impact of waiting was articulated by one individual:

You come to a place where you are turned into…you are not supposed to do anything, literally. And it is until further notice. And the waiting is the one that is maddening. You wait for a day, you wait for a week, it goes to a month, it goes to a year, another year, another year…and then before you know it...God, I cannot tell you, Amy. People have no clue what that is like. Just living in limbo. Not knowing what will happen to you. Not knowing whether the next thing is to be put in handcuffs and be deported. It is so traumatizing.

It was evident that the challenges associated with seeking asylum in the UK made for a liminal existence of sorts. Several interviewees described the mental distress of uncertainty and fear, coupled with the culture of disbelief that they strongly felt exists within the Home Office. Several respondents spoke of the ‘criminality’ that they had been made to feel by seeking asylum. One interviewee described the extraordinary lengths that they had gone to when seriously ill in hospital to ensure that they were still able to sign at the police station every month.15

Even when I was in hospital for one year I used to run away from the hospital...I didn’t want to miss this reporting. I could wait for the nurses to go for their lunch. When they go for lunch I knew that the ward was quiet...I would come out from my oxygen - because I used to stay on oxygen; I couldn’t be able to talk or what. I wasn’t able to walk very well because my legs were all swollen. I would just drag myself slowly, slowly. Get to the lift and go down and I’d already called the taxi, which was waiting for me downstairs. Get into the taxi, go to the police station, report, just to be seen that I had gone. Go back to the taxi and go back to the hospital and wait for another month again...that was the worst thing. I used to wonder ‘what have I done to be reporting to the police station?’

4.5.2 Funding provision for legal aid

Good legal representation was repeatedly raised by the interviewees as impacting upon their capacity to cope. Finding a solicitor who could help them to be successful in gaining permission to remain in the UK was a way in which they perceived that they would be able to move on with their lives. However, securing legal representation also played a role in helping individuals to know that there case was believed to be ‘credible.’ Once again the social networks that individuals had created became crucial in securing (and paying for) private legal representation in the absence of the provision of legal aid (where cuts to legal aid funding had meant that their cases were not deemed ‘compelling’ enough by legal aid providers). Related to legal aid provision, the support of local MPs

15 Individuals awaiting a decision on their case may be required to report to UKBA (UKBA, 2012b). This may be at an official centre (ibid) or at a local police station.
in Oxford (Andrew Smith MP and the former Liberal Democrat MP, Evan Harris) also played a crucial role in advocating on behalf of individuals.

4.6 The propensity to cope

4.6.1 Resilience and resourcefulness

In spite of the seemingly insurmountable struggles that the interviewees had faced, it must be acknowledged that all of the respondents displayed evidence of resilience and resourcefulness. This statement is in no way intended to undermine the need to be resilient and resourceful in order to survive, but rather acts as a way of demonstrating that as Eastmond (2007) argued, refugees are indeed people with ‘agency and voice’. This resilience is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that despite there being no formal housing provision for individuals seeking asylum in Oxford, many decide to remain in the city (and face the resultant challenges) because they feel a sense of community and because there clearly exist strong social networks. The resilience of one individual in particular, was striking. In the face of adversity their sense of capability was evident:

I lose my house, I say ‘oh my God.’ I could say ‘oh, no good. I lose my house.’ But I say ‘no, I have a head, legs, good hands. Wake up!’ But I know what it is like with no power…I have power. My dad told me before ‘you have power…’ In UK you can have power. Now I have a [business omitted]. I have the [name of business omitted]. I have the place in [country omitted].

However, this individual’s capacity to cope is seemingly influenced by their asylum status and thus their permission to work legally. Their power is arguably derived (in part at least) from being able to legally work and establish a business. Where work is either prohibited or difficult to find, coping becomes harder for the individuals who I interviewed.

4.6.2 When coping doesn’t exist

While the research demonstrated the ways in which individuals have been given strength and support, there was not an overall sense of ‘coping’ as such, expressed. As one interviewee articulated: “Coping is dealing with something. A lack of options means that you can’t cope; just exist.” There was a sense among interviewees that the system has narrowly defined what an individual needs in order to cope (i.e. £36.62 per week).

There are things you need to buy. Essential needs in life and you find that on the financial side you are doing badly and it really affects you psychologically...As long as you have £37 in vouchers for food and accommodation, then for them they think you don’t have any problems.

This definition of what is required was rejected by interviewees who described the need for a more holistic understanding of coping; one that recognises how people rebuild meaningful ways of life (Summerfield, 2001). For example, by having a place to call home, through socialising, eating well and dressing smartly: (“I have to find work in order to pay rent, buy clothes, eat, go out.”) Government policies arguably prohibit individuals from creating a meaningful way of life while they are in the asylum system.

Even when leave to remain was granted, significant problems continued to exist for the individuals. Difficulties securing accommodation, finding appropriate employment and being able to meet the
cost of living in Oxford were of significant concern. The lack of employment opportunities also created new challenges for individuals to contend with.

The perceived change that being granted leave to remain would bring to the individuals’ lives was rarely as it was imagined it would be. Individuals’ experiences both pre and post-flight ran deep. Change could not come, it would seem for some, through leave to remain alone. The distress related to the reasons why individuals had sought asylum in the UK was evident, and, as this quote illustrates, is unlikely to dissipate even if leave to remain is granted.

Status to me was just a piece of paper. On a practical level it makes it easier to seek employment. It won’t be as difficult. But you don’t switch off from years of panic. I never got to celebrate. [Name omitted] said we should celebrate, but I said I wanted to celebrate when it was over. **Do you feel like it is over yet?** Not really, no. Maybe when I have citizenship, a passport. Once I have a stronger foundation I want to get justice for the people who could not get out. This is phase one of the battle. Phase two is to continue.

For those individuals without status there was an apparent exasperation – simply not knowing what to do next. The feeling of utter loss expressed by two of the interviewees eroded any notion of coping.

I feel that in the future if I do not get my papers then I will lose everything. It is five years and I have lost everything. People might say that you are safer here than in [country omitted]. In [country omitted] I might be in the prison, but in five years things kill me slowly here. It kills your mind.

I am still waiting. Waiting, waiting, waiting. We have this saying – it is like being between a nail and wood. You don’t know whether to hammer it or not. You don’t know whether to go home, but you cannot stay like this.

This chapter has attempted to draw out some of the most relevant findings from my research and provide a more informed understanding of the ways in which individuals cope with the challenges of seeking asylum in Oxford; particularly in relation to housing and the prohibition of employment, but also more broadly. It has been impossible to exhaustively discuss the ways in which the capacities of individuals to cope are influenced and impacted. The following chapter will present the conclusions that can be drawn from this small research study; both in terms of the ways in which individuals in Oxford cope with seeking asylum and the factors that have been found to impact upon their propensity to cope.
Chapter Five: Conclusions

This dissertation has sought to understand some of the coping mechanisms employed by refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford. From its inception, I wanted to ensure that their experiences were at the heart of this research. It has specifically, but not exclusively, focused on the ways that individuals cope in relation to housing (in the absence of statutory provision) and in light of the prohibition of employment. Understanding more about the role that social networks play in providing informal mechanisms for coping was central to this study.

It was essential that this study allowed for both the vulnerabilities and capacities of refugees and individuals seeking asylum to be understood. Therefore, the vulnerabilities and capacities analysis and the refugee acculturation model provided useful conceptual frameworks from which to work. I did not want to ‘essentialize’ the experiences of refugees (Malkki, 1995) or assume vulnerability, and thus a critical analysis of the trauma discourse and an understanding of models of resilience and resistance proved extremely relevant.

My research suggested that social networks are integral for providing informal ways of coping for individuals seeking asylum in Oxford. This was particularly salient in terms of housing provision. Similarly, social networks provided opportunities for small-scale income generation and were found to foster an environment that allowed an exchange of skills and services to take place for mutual, though not always equal, benefit. The support extended to individuals seeking asylum in Oxford through social networks appears to have created an environment in which refugees and asylum seekers feel safe and where some are reminded of home. I argue that this environment has better enabled individuals to cope with some of the losses experienced as a result of exile.

In the absence of statutory housing support and in light of the prohibition of employment, it is difficult to imagine how the individuals whom I interviewed for this research would have managed without the social support that they received. This support is extended by communities, as well as by support organisations in the city.

However, my research revealed that despite the positive difference that this support has made to the lives of individuals in Oxford and despite the resilience that individuals displayed, the absence of statutory housing provision for those individuals seeking asylum, coupled with existing government policies, makes the propensity to truly cope challenging. Individuals are forced to make difficult decisions. The mental distress of current stressors on the lives of individuals was evident.

Given that this research was conducted at a time when there has been a reduction in funding for refugee support organisations and cuts to legal aid provision, it was important to try to understand some of the ways that these issues may have impacted upon the capacity of individuals to cope. Interviewees made explicit references to the ways in which they had personally been affected by cuts to legal aid provision and speculated about the ways in which they thought the lives of individuals seeking asylum in Oxford may be impacted by a reduction in support services available. However, for the integrity of this research, it is necessary to acknowledge that this was often speculation drawn from their experiences.
While the support offered by organisations in Oxford is clearly invaluable to the lives of those I interviewed, I argue that the support extended through informal social networks is as important. It is these communities that are seemingly providing the majority of housing and income generating opportunities for individuals seeking asylum in Oxford.

Given the small scale nature of this research, it cannot and does not claim to be representative of the experiences of all refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford. The possible ‘uniqueness’ of Oxford as described by my interviewees must also be kept in mind. Individuals’ experiences would likely differ in other parts of the UK where different forms of support exist. Furthermore, it has not been possible within this dissertation to address all of the many complex mechanisms that individuals employ in order to cope with the challenges of seeking asylum. The research that I conducted produced a wealth of information and there are inevitably issues that I have not been able to address in depth and yet are worthy of discussion.

While this research has revealed the resilience and resourcefulness inherent in the individuals that I interviewed, the reliance on informal social networks in order to cope is of concern. There is the risk that not only can the long-term sustainability of this reliance be questioned, but that it also masks the reality of the stressors placed upon individuals seeking asylum.

The determination of the individuals whom I interviewed to remain in Oxford and rebuild meaningful lives demonstrates that people seeking asylum rarely want to be passive recipients of welfare. Rather they want to be social actors. I argue that the UK asylum system makes this extremely difficult for individuals. By attempting to dictate where asylum seekers can live and by prohibiting employment, self-reliance and self-determination is made unobtainable. The propensity to truly cope is thus questionable.
References


Appendices

Appendix 1

Service provider interviews

‘A’, 4 June 2012, (Sub-Saharan) African communities worker

Clarkson, Susan, 12 June 2012, Co-ordinator, St Francis House

Dhall, Sushila, 14 June 2012, Counsellor, Refugee Resource

Flatman, Tim, 22 June 2012, Immigration Caseworker for Andrew Smith MP (Oxford East)

Greenaway, Mark, 18 July 2012, ESOL tutor and Co-ordinator at Open Door

Griffiths, Melanie, 29 May 2012, Chair of Open Door and PhD candidate at the University of Oxford

Imaan, Saeeda, 22 June 2012, Director, Asylum Welcome

Koroma, Zainab, 13 July 2012, Services Manager (Thames Valley) British Red Cross

Moffett-Levy, Jo, 25 April 2012, Co-ordinator, Open Door

Stansfeld, Wyon, 19 July 2012, Development Manager, Emmaus Oxford

Tudge, Martin, 30 July 2012, Community Development, Oxford City Council
Appendix 2

Interviews with refugees and individuals seeking asylum

A, 30 July 2012
F, 26 July 2012
G, 26 July 2012
H, 24 July 2012
J, 5 July 2012
L, 16 July 2012
M, 25 July 2012
N, 25 July 2012
R, 1 June 2012
Appendix 3 Consent form (service providers)

**Full title of Project:** Understanding the coping mechanisms of asylum seekers and refugees in Oxford, in relation to key issues (e.g. housing).

**Name, position and contact address of Researcher:**
Amy Merone, Postgraduate Student, MA in Development and Emergency Practice.
Contact details: amymerone@yahoo.co.uk or 10090056@brookes.ac.uk

The supervisor of this dissertation, Richard Carver, can be contacted if you have any concerns relating to this research.
Richard Carver, Senior Lecturer in Human Rights and Governance, Centre for Development and Emergency Practice, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, OX3 0BP.
rcarver@brookes.ac.uk Telephone: 01865 483 235.

Please tick box

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.

I agree to take part in the above study.

Please tick box

I agree to the interview / focus group / consultation being audio recorded

I agree to the use of quotes in publications

**Procedure**
If you agree to take part in this research, you will be asked a series of questions about the ways in which your organisation seeks to provide support to asylum seekers and refugees in Oxford, enabling them to cope. The interview should last no more than 1 hour. The information provided by you and other interviewees will be used to understand some of the ways that asylum seekers and refugees cope, particularly where there is a lack of, or reduction, in support services available.

_________________________________________  ______________  ______________________
Name of Participant                  Date                      Signature

_________________________________________  ______________  ______________________
Name of Researcher                   Date                      Signature
Appendix 4 Consent form (refugees and individuals seeking asylum)

Full title of Project: Understanding the coping mechanisms of asylum seekers and refugees in Oxford, in relation to key issues (e.g. housing).

Name, position and contact address of Researcher:
Amy Merone, Postgraduate Student, MA in Development and Emergency Practice. Contact details: amymerone@yahoo.co.uk or 10090056@brookes.ac.uk

The supervisor of this dissertation, Richard Carver, can be contacted if you have any concerns relating to this research.
Richard Carver, Senior Lecturer in Human Rights and Governance, Centre for Development and Emergency Practice, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, OX3 0BP. rcarver@brookes.ac.uk Telephone: 01865 483 235.

Please initial box

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.

I agree to take part in the above study.

Please tick box

I agree to the interview / focus group / consultation being audio recorded

I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications

Procedure
If you agree to take part in this research, you will be asked a series of questions about the ways in which you cope and seek support as an asylum seeker or refugee in Oxford. The interview should last no more than 1 hour. The information provided by you and other interviewees will be used to understand some of the ways that you manage your situation, particularly where there is a lack of, or reduction, in support services available.

Confidentiality
The information shared in this interview will be anonymised and unrecognisable. Information stored (i.e. interview notes) will not contain any personal information that could identify you.

_________________________________________  _________________  ______________________
Name of Participant (optional)  Date  Signature

_________________________________________  _________________  ______________________
Name of Researcher  Date  Signature
Appendix 5 Information sheet: Participation in research (service providers)

**Study title**
The propensity to cope: understanding some of the coping mechanisms of asylum seekers and refugees in Oxford, in relation to key issues (e.g. housing).

**Invitation paragraph**
You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information.

**What is the purpose of the study?**
This research seeks to provide a more informed understanding of some of the coping mechanisms employed by asylum seekers and refugees in Oxford, in relation to key issues. It specifically seeks to understand the resiliency, and ways and means of coping that asylum seekers and refugees have, particularly where there is a lack of, or reduction, in support services available.

**Why have I been invited to participate?**
This research seeks to understand more about the realities and coping mechanisms of asylum seekers and refugees in Oxford; seeking to understand the complexities of the ways in which asylum seekers and refugees cope with their situations. The insights of individuals seeking asylum and refugees, and individuals and organisations providing support, will be invaluable.

**Do I have to take part?**
It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

**What will be involved if I take part?**
The research will be carried out by interview. There will be a series of questions, which you will be asked to answer. The interview should not last longer than one hour.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**
Little attention has been paid in a UK context to understanding the coping mechanisms of asylum seekers and refugees, and to understanding the ways in which individuals are often social actors within the host communities that they are living in. Furthermore, little research exists as to the effects that the limited funding is having on the ability of asylum seekers and refugees to cope, or what services asylum seekers and refugees would prioritise at this current time to support their ability to cope. I hope that this research can contribute towards a more informed understanding of these issues.

**Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?**
The information shared in this interview will be used as a way to understand some of the coping mechanisms that asylum seekers and refugees in Oxford employ. The information that you share about your work (and that of the organisation that you represent – if applicable) will be used in this dissertation to inform an understanding of coping mechanisms.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**
The results of this research will appear in the dissertation that I am writing in partial fulfilment for the MA in Development and Emergency Practice. Following submission of my dissertation, a copy of
it can be made available to you, should you wish to see one, or should you be interested in the findings of this research.

**Who is organising and funding the research?**
This research is being conducted through Oxford Brookes University and I am a student on the MA programme in Development and Emergency Practice.

**Contact for further information**
The supervisor of this dissertation, Richard Carver, can be contacted if you have any concerns relating to this research.

*Richard Carver, Senior Lecturer in Human Rights and Governance, Centre for Development and Emergency Practice, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, OX3 0BP. Email: rcarver@brookes.ac.uk Telephone: 01865 483 235.*

If you have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted, you should contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee on ethics@brookes.ac.uk.

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this information sheet and for considering taking part in this research.

Amy Merone
Summer 2012
Appendix 6 Information sheet: Participation in research (refugees and individuals seeking asylum)

Study title
The propensity to cope: understanding some of the coping mechanisms of asylum seekers and refugees in Oxford, in relation to key issues (e.g. housing).

Invitation paragraph
You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?
This research seeks to provide a more informed understanding of some of the coping mechanisms employed by asylum seekers and refugees in Oxford, in relation to key issues. It specifically seeks to understand the resiliency, and ways and means of coping that asylum seekers and refugees have, particularly where there is a lack of, or reduction, in support services available.

Why have I been invited to participate?
This research seeks to understand more about the realities and coping mechanisms of asylum seekers and refugees in Oxford; seeking to understand the complexities of the ways in which asylum seekers and refugees cope with their situations. The insights of individuals seeking asylum and refugees, and those individuals and organisations providing support, will be invaluable.

Do I have to take part?
It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

What will be involved if I take part?
The research will be carried out by interview. There will be a series of questions, which you will be asked to answer. The interview should not last longer than one hour.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?
Little attention has been paid in a UK context to understanding the coping mechanisms of asylum seekers and refugees, and to understanding the ways in which individuals are often social actors within the host communities that they are living in. Furthermore, little research exists as to the effects that the limited funding is having on the ability of asylum seekers and refugees to cope, or what services asylum seekers and refugees would prioritise at this current time to support their ability to cope. I hope that this research can contribute towards a more informed understanding of these issues.

Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?
The information shared in this interview can be anonymised and unrecognisable, should you wish. Information stored (i.e. interview notes) will not contain any personal information that could identify you.

What will happen to the results of the research study?
The results of this research will appear in the dissertation that I am writing in partial fulfilment for the MA in Development and Emergency Practice. Following submission of my dissertation, a copy of it can be made available to you, should you wish to see one, or should you be interested in the findings of this research.
Who is organising and funding the research?
This research is being conducted through Oxford Brookes University and I am a student on the MA programme in Development and Emergency Practice.

Contact for Further Information
The supervisor of this dissertation, Richard Carver, can be contacted if you have any concerns relating to this research.

Richard Carver, Senior Lecturer in Human Rights and Governance, Centre for Development and Emergency Practice, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, OX3 0BP. Email: rcarver@brookes.ac.uk
Telephone: 01865 483 235.

If you have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted, you should contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee on ethics@brookes.ac.uk.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for considering taking part in this research.

Amy Merone
Summer 2012
Appendix 7 Questions for service providers

The service

1. Date of interview
2. Name of interviewee (optional)
3. Name of organisation
4. How long has your organisation been providing support to asylum seekers and refugees?
5. Can you describe the service(s) that your organisation offers?
6. What informs the kind of support services that you offer?
7. What kinds of support needs do your clients have?

Coping mechanisms

8. Could you describe some of the formal and informal ways that you understand asylum seekers and refugees use to cope in relation to their:
   - Housing needs
   - Educational needs
   - Employment/livelihood needs
9. Could you describe to me the role/s that social networks and communities play in providing support to refugees and individuals seeking asylum in Oxford?
10. In your experience, have the ways in which asylum seekers and refugees cope with the process and challenges of seeking asylum changed during the time that you have worked in the sector?
11. Are you able to say in what ways your organisation has been impacted in terms of service delivery, by cuts to funding?
12. [If the organisation has experienced funding cuts] How do you think reductions in funding for your organisation have impacted upon your clients’ capacity to cope with the challenges of seeking asylum?
13. In your opinion, do you think that the capacity of asylum seekers and refugees to cope and their resilience, is recognised and respected enough?
14. If you had to prioritise the services that you offer that support asylum seekers and refugees to cope with the challenges of seeking asylum, how would you determine which services to prioritise, and what would inform your decision?
15. Thank you so much for taking the time to be interviewed. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about?
Appendix 8 Questions for refugees and individuals seeking asylum

Background

1. Date of interview
2. Country of origin (optional)
3. Length of time in the UK
4. Length of time in Oxford
5. Have you lived in other parts of the UK?
6. What led to you living in Oxford (as opposed to somewhere else in the UK?)
7. Current asylum status (and length of time taken to be granted status, if applicable)

Coping mechanisms

8. Could you describe both the informal and formal ways that you manage in relation to your:
   - Housing needs
   - Educational needs
   - Employment/livelihood needs
   - Social needs

9. Who are the people/what are the services/issues that impact on your ability to cope with the challenges of seeking asylum? [Prompt: Questions leading from their response, which allow the interviewee to describe how these people/services/issues, provide support].

10. If you could decide what forms of support were offered by agencies to assist your capacity to manage, what sorts of activities/services would you prioritise?

11. Are there ways in which you think asylum seekers and refugees in Oxford could be better supported to manage with the challenges of seeking asylum?

12. How has your ability to cope changed over time and what has made a difference to your capacity to cope?

13. Are there ways in which your ability to manage has been affected by a reduction in support services offered to asylum seekers and refugees in Oxford?

14. If so, could you describe alternative ways of coping that you have developed as a result of a reduction in formal support services offered?

15. Do you think that refugees and people seeking asylum are recognised by the host society for their capacity to cope?

16. Thank you so much for taking the time to answer these questions. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about, or add?
Appendix 9 Presentation of data

The five over-arching categories (housing, employment, social networks, the perceived impact of government policies and legislation on the propensity to cope, and the overall propensity of individuals to cope) were identified as focal points for this research prior to its commencement (in line with my research objectives). However, the sub-categories and themes emerged through the process of inductive coding. Below is the data (bullet pointed) that relates to each of the five over-arching categories and the emergence of dominant sub-categories and themes. Each of the interview transcripts was read several times over and annotations were made that related to each of the categories. Sub-categories were identified and grouped together. The dominance and recurrence of certain themes (relating to the research objectives) led to their eventual inclusion within the main body of analysis and discussion (as presented in Chapter Four).

Housing (category in line with research objectives)

Statutory support:
Local authority housing (with ILR status) (UASC – previously)
Local authority housing (due to ill health and now as a result of British citizenship)
Dispersal (previously)

Non-statutory support:
Staying with friends (destitute)
Renting through illegal employment
Renting through legal employment
Privately funded
Charitable housing organisation

Other:
Detention (previously)

Issues of concern around the absence of statutory housing provision (sub category)
Destitution
Dependency on friends for floor, sofa space
Cycle of moving to reduce perception of dependency
Perception of being ‘burdensome’ – leaving early in a morning, returning late at night
Sharing of rooms in order to reduce cost of living - overcrowding
Stigma of not having a place to call home – individuals not wanting to socialise as a result (feeling that they are not well-kempt). People are proud – reluctance to ask for help – isolation as a result
Falling between the gaps when status is granted (losing housing provided by NASS and not being able to access local authority housing – creation of destitution)
Not understanding rights or what support you may be entitled to (complexity of system)
Non-eligibility for local authority housing. Oxon expensive and so working for the house rent alone
Homelessness – support extended by individuals with TLR, ILR – led to one interviewee’s homelessness

Why Oxford? (emerging theme)
Further loss/distress in another part of the UK (without support networks, ignorance experienced in other parts of the UK)
Racism experienced or heard of in other parts of the UK
Diversity of Oxford – ability to ‘blend in’ with others
Shared understanding (experiences of exile) therapeutic (through services offered by organisations)
Opportunities for work – social networks

Feeling of home in OX4 – particularly on the Cowley Road. Being able to talk in your own language.

Opportunities to study

Oxford as a small and safe city

Oxford initially did not matter, but now children are in a good school and they have friends here

Social networks – but cost of Oxon makes it difficult to cope

Been told about the sense of community that existed in Oxford (pre-existing knowledge)

Feeling of home – church, friends, community

**Employment (category in line with research objectives)**

Illegal working (emerging theme)

To afford to pay rent

To eat, buy clothes, go out – to be able to do more than just exist – to be able to *live*

Exploitation as a result of illegally working (using somebody else’s identity), paid less than the minimum wage

Travelling to other parts of the UK for work

Illegal employment used to be easier to obtain (fewer checks)

Social networks/communities providing opportunities for income-generation

Empowered knowing that other people were illegally working too

**Prohibition of employment**

Alienation and isolation. Made to feel like you do not fit into society. Different rules for you. Cause of depression and taking anti-depressants

Prohibition of employment means you cannot integrate

**Employment**

Helps you to bond with people, create connections

Employment offers a way to learn English

Helps to keep busy and allows no time for thinking – too busy surviving

Unable to find employment of any kind (reliant on social support and jobseekers allowance)

Scarcity of employment and the cost of living in Oxon

**Education and English language proficiency (emerging theme)**

English learnt as a result of a relationship with an English girlfriend

Self-taught by reading newspapers, socialising

Detrimental impact of not knowing English – not being able to understand correspondence sent from the Home Office, do not know your rights

Reliance on social networks – members of your community – compromises confidentiality

Isolation – individuals stay within their own communities because they cannot speak English

Increased autonomy of being able to speak and read English

Education in place of employment – but still feeling depressed

Alternative to being dependent on anti-depressants (way to keep busy). Way of meeting new people and everything changes

Education as a way of coping – learning about the experiences that they have been through

English learnt through volunteering – meeting individuals who could help (as teachers).

Reliance on friends to interpret letters, social messages (e.g. text messages, Facebook messages)
Social networks (category in line with research objectives)

Housing (emerging theme)
Helping each other to find accommodation
Communities providing housing to the ‘hidden homeless’
Churches providing accommodation to people who are destitute
Support extended to people of the same nationality – obliged to support each other
Extending support as a way of not forgetting your own situation
Obligation to support and be supported

Employment (emerging theme)
Cash-in-hand opportunities: car washing, babysitting, hair braiding
Exchange of skills – place to stay in exchange for cooking/babysitting
Exploitation – as related to social networks

Practical and emotional support provision (emerging theme)
Provision of food, money
Help in understanding letters, official documentation
Faith and the support extended to individuals through faith groups
Knowing who to trust, which solicitors to use (‘success’ stories)
Transnational links – knowing people from your home country and support extended as a result
Fundraising for individuals who are detained
Friends who supported their case – travelling to obtain evidence to be used in a legal trial. Provision of financial assistance, housing, legal representation, education
Sharing the load. Without friends you go mad.
Harambee – sharing of food, clothes, bringing what you have for whoever is in need
Provide everything needed – without them vulnerability (suicide)
In detention – detainees helping one another to stop flights – faxing the high court for one another to seek injunctions and prevent removal
Filling the gap of isolation

Support organisations (emerging theme, but identified in line with research objectives)
To interpret/assist with communication from the Home Office
Social space to meet with friends
Provision of practical support e.g. food
GP surgeries – being able to go there and cry
Provision of a home
Practical support: bus passes to travel to college
Amnesty International – taking up an individual’s case
Collectivist nature of African societies. Sharing. No such thing as ownership. UK more individualistic, so support organisations providing a comfort – healing (reminder of home)
Provision of counselling and mentoring – knowing that somebody is interested in you
Support of MPs – knowing somebody is helping with your case, asking questions
Support in pursuing dreams (education)
Refugee Resource like a ‘mum and dad’
Belief in your case in the absence of belief from the Home Office
Support not as it once was because of the cuts – used to be helped with travel costs, money for education
Way to make friends, which has led to other opportunities – knowing people, learning new skills (cooking, public speaking)
Emotional and moral support – but cannot eliminate the source of stress
Mental health/ ‘stressors’ (emerging theme that recurred in different categories)
Pressure from home – people that were left behind, sacrifices that others made, not being able to support people still at home
Pre-flight experience, leaving loved ones (separation), disbelief from the Home Office
Not having a place to call home, sleepless nights caused by this and by thinking too much
Fear of being caught working illegally
Fear of being deported
Not being allowed to work ‘killing me’
Depression caused by sitting at home and not being allowed to work. Too much time to think
Staying in the house – start talking to yourself, banging walls
Made to feel as though you have committed a crime – psychological impact of the brown envelope
Traumatization of waiting for a decision
Traumatic experience that people have left and the rejection and horrible treatment in the UK

Propensity to cope (category in line with research objectives)
Never get over it – length of time taken, disbelief, money taken by solicitors, the experience of getting the brown envelope containing a refusal – hardest thing to endure. No way of coping with that. Even with papers, no way of forgetting what you went through
Organisations are helpful, but can’t do anything. It is the system that needs changing
Prayer as a way of coping
Women marrying as a way of survival
Good legal representation (legal aid), coupled with support from Amnesty International
Writing as a way of making sense of past experiences
Identity taken away from you (not allowed to work, not allowed to think)
Both what you have experienced (personal circumstances) and what happens here. Experiences here fuel everything
Loss in own country and here – nothing left here or back home – staying in the house 24 hours a day
Being believed in – credibility in your case – friends to support your case
Being able to work – stand on your own
Power – being able to set up a business, work. Provide money for family back home
Being able to blend in – dependent on looking like others – being able to buy clothes that allow for this
Sports activities and work

Government policies/legislation (category in line with research objectives)
Prohibition of employment an impediment to coping
Period of time you are expected to wait – at a loss as to what to do – stay or return home?
Feeling of being let down by the legal system – hope invested in solicitors. Vulnerability of individuals – solicitors that take advantage of vulnerability
Shame of having to take benefits – wanting to be able to work and pay taxes
No availability of legal aid
Cuts to ESOL funding – used to be a way of empowering people. Supposed to enable people to integrate
If education is taken away then people will be left to rot. People can’t communicate, cannot be employed
Detention – treated as a criminal, put with criminals
Having to sign every month at the police station – being treated like a criminal
System treats you like the underclass – dignity is taken away, spirit is broken down – deterrent to others
Appendix 10

Statement of originality

This thesis is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by explicit references.

Signed:…………………………………….... Date: 7 September 2012

Amy Merone

I hereby give my consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

Signed:…………………………………… Date: 7 September 2012

Amy Merone

This dissertation involved human participants. A form E1BE for each group of participants, showing ethics review approval, has been attached to this dissertation as an appendix.
**Faculty Of Technology, Design & Environment, Oxford Brookes University**

**ARCHITECTURE / PLANNING / REAL ESTATE & CONSTRUCTION**

**RESEARCH ETHICS FORM E1BE FOR STUDENTS ON TAUGHT COURSES**

*Please read the Guidance Notes at www.brookes.ac.uk/res/ethics/forms*

### Section A - You & your project

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### Section B - Your participants

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<td>Vulnerable individuals</td>
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<th>Briefly describe these participants</th>
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<td>Service providers in Oxford, providing support to asylum seekers and refugees.</td>
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<td>Through personal contacts and by mapping service provision in Oxford.</td>
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### Section C - Your data collection

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### Section D - Declaration

I declare that I will

- give all participants an information sheet conforming to university guidelines
- not contact any participant until my supervisor has approved my information sheet, research questions and methodology
- be sufficiently well-trained in necessary methods of data collection and analysis

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You may only start fieldwork when this form has been signed by your supervisor & your Module Leader.
Section A - You & your project

What is your name?

First name: Amy
Surname: Merone

What is your student number?
10090056

What is your email address?
10090056@brookes.ac.uk

What is your supervisor's name?

First name: Richard
Surname: Carver

What is your supervisor's email address?
r.carver@brookes.ac.uk

In which Department are you studying?
- Architecture
- Planning
- REC

What course are you taking?
- MA Development and Emergency Practice

What is the topic area of your research?
Coping mechanisms of asylum seekers and refugees in Oxford.

On what kinds of topics will you be collecting data from the participants in the research?
Coping mechanisms and support services available to asylum seekers and refugees, their propensity to cope, and how their coping mechanisms are influenced.

Section B - Your participants

What kind of participants will be involved in your research? (Please tick one - if more than one, then complete a separate form)
- Professional/management group
- Members of the general public
- Vulnerable individuals

Briefly describe these participants
Asylum seekers and refugees living in Oxford.

How many participants will be involved?
Approx Number of people: 25

How will the participants be selected?
Through refugee organisations, and possibly as a result of snowball sampling.

Section C - Your data collection

When is your data collection likely to start?
01062012

What will be your method of data collection?
- In-depth interviews
- Direct observation
- Other, please specify
- Focus group discussions.

What kind of data will you be collecting?
- Quantitative/statistical/numerical
- Qualitative/written/text
- Images/drawings/maps

Will it be possible to avoid asking for personal data from the participants?
- Yes [X] No

Will it be possible to ensure the participants are not being deceived in any way?
- Yes [X] No

Will it be possible to ensure the participants remain completely anonymous?
- Yes [X] No

Will it be possible to ensure the participants do not suffer any negative consequences?
- Yes [X] No

Section D - Declaration

I declare that I will
- give all participants an information sheet conforming to university guidelines
- not contact any participant until my supervisor has approved my information sheet, research questions and methodology
- be sufficiently well-trained in necessary methods of data collection and analysis

Student signature: Amy Merone
Date: 11.05.12

Supervisor signature: m
Date: 11.5.12

Module Leader signature: [Signature]
Date: 12.6.12

You may only start fieldwork when this form has been signed by your supervisor & your Module Leader.