Refugee Experience and Transformative Learning

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Abstract

This paper uses the biographical method to investigate the contribution of the refugee experience in the process of transformation in young Afghan asylum seekers in Greece. It examines the participants' extremely adverse socio-political background in their country of origin; the marginalization that existed in the long-term intermediate refugee station, Iran; the arduous and perilous journey to the West and their experiences in their new host country Greece. What emerges is that the participants' initial frame of reference is problematic, in the sense that they can no longer function effectively in the new social environment (the host country). Thus, they learn a new frame of reference and there is a transformation of their wider mental habits. By means of a comparative reflective approach of old and new frames of reference and mentalities, the participants re-evaluate among other things, religion, gender and intergenerational relations, and generally the adoption of human rights as a prerequisite *sine qua non*, for the restoration of respect for human existence.

Keywords

Introduction

The present paper investigates the contribution of the refugee experience in the process of transformation of young asylum seekers in Greece. Therefore, the particular thematic belongs to the wider scientific field of Refugee Studies, having an anthropological approach (*Anthropology of Refugees*) (Harrell-Bond & Voutira, 1992). It also enters the scientific field of Transformative Learning (TL).

What is of primary interest is to what degree the refugees' difficulties are raised to disorienting experiences of the utmost importance. These constitute a potential starting point for internal transformational processes, starting with the reevaluation of the arguments which possibly support problematic signifying perspectives or dysfunctional frames of reference, including those representing cultural or environmental factors. In this way, these frames can become more inclusive, open and contemplative and – thereby – be transformed (Mezirow, 2000). In particular, it is examined to what degree and in what ways the participants process their existing frames of reference, learn new ones, and transform scopes, views and, in general, their mental habits.

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The research target group was the young male Muslim Afghan population who sought political asylum and who are staying at the reception centre for unaccompanied minors in Makrinitisa, Volos. This is a village on mount Pilion in central Greece. The reception centre that is being researched in this paper operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Health and Social Solidarity and can house about 30 people. Arsis, a social NGO working since 1992 to support children and young people and defend their rights, has been responsible for its operation since 2005 and has been funded by the European Refugee Fund since 2009. The majority of the residents includes Afghans, Sudanese, Nigerians, Bangladeshis, Iraqis, Kurds, who declare themselves minors (without necessarily being so), in order to have easier access to formal refugee status.

It is a case study, whose thematic significance is dual. On the one hand, while the thematic of refugees and refugeeism has been an important research field in the social sciences in the last decades, of itself, it is a recognized research field (Malkki, 1995; Black, 2001). While the theory of TL increasingly attracts pedagogic researchers, the combination of the two scientific fields (the refugee experience as a starting point for internal transformation) it is not a research topic in Greece. This research, thus, aspires to contribute to the theory of TL through the refugee experience in contemporary Greek society.

The study is organized into three sections. The first section briefly presents the theoretical framework, including a brief reference to the status questions on the research concerning immigration and refugeeism issues and to TL. The second section presents the research as a whole: the participants, the methodological framework and the research process including its limitations. In this section, significant findings are also presented which relate to the identification of the refugees'

problematic frames of reference before, during and "after" the refugee experience; the learning of new frames of reference; transforming broader mental habits and new conceptual structures. The third section contains a conclusive summary and discussion.

Theoretical framework
The Refugee Experience

The thematic of refugees and refugeeism as a special part of immigrants and immigration, respectively, boasts rich research results, especially in recent decades. Although our age has been called "the Era of Homeless Man" (Kliot, 1987), the myth however, has now been refuted that intra- and intercontinental population movement is a problematic phenomenon mainly of the modern era (Castles, 2008). Modern research deals with, among other things, aspects of the difficulties encountered by the immigrants themselves as human entities and not just as moving numbers (Facchini, Lorz & Willmann, 2006). For example, it looks at the expulsion and forced abandonment of familiar people and goods (Kunz, 1981); the attendant feelings of loss and confusion (Mortland, 1987); the often highly dangerous transition to the unfamiliar host society, with all its difficulties, by definition, it entails (Stein, 1981); and, generally, the emergence of the refugee journey, which is an eminently encounter with otherness, a key component of liminality, with significant potential transformation of refugees, often through painful procedures (Morgan, 2010; Morrice, 2012). Also, current research focuses in particular on the constructions of risk for the "foreign" and fear resulting from such constructions and anti-immigrant stereotyping (McLaren, 2003; Jayati, 2011), with emphasis on constructing Muslim risks and increasing Islamophobia across the western society (Ennaji, 2010). Throughout

this xenophobia, leading to racist behavior and generally hostile reception of refugees in host communities (Martin, 2005), and, ultimately, low asylum approval rates (Neumayer, 2005), Greece appears to exceed, by far, the other European countries (Karakatsanis & Swarts, 2007).

A significant number of the world refugee population is of Afghan origin. Already during the decade of the Afghan-Soviet war (1979-1989) with stiff resistance from armed rebel groups of mujahedin and the general socio-political instability in the country, consecutive waves of Afghan refugees were heading to neighboring countries. At the end of the war and the withdrawal of the Russian military occupation, a new long-term volatility ensued. The Islamic fundamentalist Taliban movement emerged, capturing the capital, Kabul in 1996 and imposing an extreme theocentric Islamic regime on Afghanistan. Even the first, post-Taliban, democratic election of the President of the country, Hamid Karzai, in 2006 and the recent democratic election of the new President Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai in 2014, failed to bring the expected security and calm to Afghan society. This is not only because a substantial number of the country's provinces are still under Taliban control but more because, despite the attempted establishment of democratic institutions and modernizing legislation, ceremonial law still prevails. The latter reproduces and perpetuates a system of discrimination against the vast majority of the Afghan population. This includes religious and ethnic minorities, women, children and generally any kind of dissent from the traditional, conservative and highly theocentric forces in the country (AREU, 2013). Due to the particularly adverse social conditions in Afghanistan, special instructions have been issued for the treatment of the Afghan refugees (UNHCR, 2010;·UNHCR, 2013). Significant

proportions try to reach Western and Northern Europe, mostly via Greece, as the main South East European gateway. After a usually traumatic and extremely dangerous crossing of Greek-Turkish land and sea borders, many are illegally sent back to Turkey by the Greek police and Coast Guard (AI, 2013; HRW, 2014b). Others are arrested in Greece and under the Dublin II Regulation, remain locked up in inhumane conditions, against their wish.

Indeed, the violation of migrants' human rights in Greece, more than repeated and systematic, is often tragic in its proportions. Disappearances, torture, various forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, assaults, denial of fair public trial, and violation of privacy are just some of the violations of human rights of foreigners on Greek territory (USDS, 2014). The situation of unaccompanied minors arriving in the country is particularly worrying. Greece fails systematically to provide them with any real help. (CECHR, 2009). Concurrently, there is a rise in the use of systematic violence by the Greek police (HRW, 2013b; AI, 2014) and the xenophobic extreme right is becoming increasingly aggressive (HRW, 2014a). Within such a politico-social context, the integration of asylum-seekers in Greece is particularly difficult, if not impossible.

Transformative Learning Issues
The thematics of TL boasts rich research results, especially in recent decades which focus increasingly on the role of experience in the internal transformation. The theory of TL has viewed experience as of great importance and particularly the experience that acts as a starting point for the transformative process of the problematic frames of reference, convictions and expectations so that they become more inclusive, multi-faceted, open, contemplative and emotionally ready for change (Mezirow, 2000). After thorough control of its validity

and restructure of signifying structures it has been stressed that, in the process of TL, the subject practices in constant control and critical contemplation of familiar and other concepts and promotes the reevaluation of themselves; a predisposition of acceptance is cultivated that no view (usually) cannot remain rigid and unchanged but through the subject's active participation in meditative processes it is restructured and transformed while the subjects themselves are lead potentially to taking action, particularly for internal improvement and social gain (Daloz, 2000) and for the development of their capability of autonomous and abstract thought.

It has been pointed out that not every change is a transformation, as the latter means a permanent change or a "second level" change, in other words, the change that takes place not only of the surface of things but a deep change, a change in the whole systemic way of thinking. Transformative change takes place only with the individual's volition. It is a voluntary internal change, which the subjects chooses for themselves, being aware that it is not segmented or fragmented but multifaceted and multi leveled, embracing always, all aspects of their life (for instance, mental, emotional, spiritual, socio-cultural). At the same time, it is irreversible, entails risk, fear and often, loss, while it presumes broadening of the individual's outlook. The transformation involves the creation of a more cohesive identity and constitutes a move towards wholeness. From the moment this transformative change means, at least in part, the restructuring of personal worldview (convictions, viewpoints or mental forms) entails loss by definition. In particular, it entails the death of the old worldview through the rebirth of a new one and the expansion of consciousness (Poutiatine, 2009).

In this research, the TL theory is applied, with two important differentiations

from the initial framework for implementation used by Mezirow and his main associates. First, this is applied beyond its basic social space, which Mezirow views as a prerequisite, mainly by the upper middle class where, the basic prerequisites of a sense of security and democracy are taken for granted. Mezirow (2000; 2003) believes that it is an essential prerequisite for TL to ensure certain features of the subject under transformation, such as maturity, education, safety, health, financial security, and emotional intelligence. On the other hand, he believes that situations such as hunger, lack of permanent accommodation, despair, illness or fear are setbacks for the contemplative comprehension of an individual's experiences and through this, their transformation. This particular view of Mezirow's is opposed by the critical theory, according to whose principles, (the marginalized) subjects, on a first level are asked to pinpoint and become aware of ways in which the hegemonic culture limits their sense of potential and, on a second level, to arm themselves against oppression, ostracism from society (Bridwell, 2013). Empirical studies, for example Bridwell (2013), with homeless Afro-American women have proven that learning can be transformative (in the holistic sense of the word) even in members of marginalized groups as long as arising from disorientating dilemmas in their lives, they develop a potential for internal change, a fact that adds to a dynamic in the social process and the social relations within it.

Second while for Mezirow (2003) TL is in line exclusively with adulthood as only then can the individual have the internal disposition for TL, including critical thinking and dialectics, this research applies the TL theory to individuals who officially but also in many cases actually in Western society, are considered minors (15-18 years old). However, at this point, it is necessary to

clarify the terms childhood and child age. These terms were constructed in Europe during the periods of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, but do not have universal significance (Rogers, 1996). The experiences of the particular narrators (work and contribution to a family income, experience of many disorienting dilemmas due to particularly adverse life conditions, refugeeism, facing death survival and living abroad without family or any other psychological or financial support) despite their young biological age, contribute to early maturity so that from a psycho-spiritual aspect they are more adult-like.

It is precisely in the doubly differentiated application of the theory of TL, in terms of social-class and age that the particular contribution of this study to the wider research on TL lies.

Presentation of the Research
The Aims

This research aims to investigate how, through the refugee experience, the participants are able to reflect critically on initially problematic frames of reference in their home country and then in the host country. It looks at how they identify mechanisms for the establishment and reinforcement of these problematic frames of reference, as well as how they develop ways of reframing them, which gradually lead to profound internal transformative processes.

The Participants

Without exception, all the participants have these basic characteristics in common: a long-term refugee experience in Iran and a dangerous refugee journey from Iran through Turkey to Greece. Table one presents additional information about each refugee.

Table 1. Experience of refugees prior to arrival in Greece, and in Greece

Name	Experiences in country of origin and previous refugee experience	Experiences in Greece
1. M. M., 15 years old (H. M.'s brother)	Increased problems with the Taliban in Afghanistan; family forced to flee Iran.	Police arrest.
2. H. M., 17 years old (M. M.'s brother; similar refugee routes)	See above (M. M.)	See above (M. M.). In addition: three months in prison.
3. T. N., 13 years old (M. N.'s brother)	Father murdered by the Taliban; Family decision to escape to Iran.	Forced sale of the family home in Afghanistan for 7,500 euros – cost of papers for transporting him to Germany. Cheated out of the money by the Afghan trafficker.
4. M. N., 15 years old (T. N.'s brother)	See above (T. N.)	See above (T. N.) In addition: police arrest and imprisonment.
5. A. H., 17 years old	Death of his parents in the war in Afghanistan; fled Iran with another family, who cheated	Arrested and beaten by the police; 9 months of repeated failed attempts to escape to

	him financially and exploited his labour, was moved to Istanbul and held captive by the traffickers.	Italy; cheated out of €2,000 by Afghan trafficker.
6. M. A., 18 years old	Traumatic experiences in Pakistan and Iran; Painful journey through Turkey to Greece.	Experiences of deep loneliness and abandonment.
7. A. L., 14 years old	Bad refugee experiences in Iran; family secretly abandoned him; escaped incognito from Iran to Turkey and Greece at the age of 13 years.	Traumatic experience aboard a drifting boat on the Aegean; police arrest and incarceration.
8. A. K., 17 years old	Family problems with the Taliban; eventful move to and stay in Iran.	Voluntary surrender to the police and incarceration.
9. M. T., 17 years old	Increased tensions with the Taliban; family escape at the age of 8 to Iran.	Two failed attempts to escape from Athens to the Albanian border and then on to Western Europe: arrest, torture and taken hostage by Albanians in Athens
10. M. G., 16 years old	2 year difficult stay in Iran.	Arrested, abused and imprisoned by the police.
11. A. M., 15 years old	To raise funds for the trip to Europe: sale of family house in Afghanistan for 12,000 euros; cheated by the trafficker.	Voluntary confinement at home to avoid the risk of police arrest and neo-fascist violence.
12. M. P., 17 years old	Family fled from Afghanistan to Iran.	Aboard damaged boat on the Aegean; police arrest and incarceration.
13. A. A., 16 years old	Negative experiences in Iran; fled to Turkey; police arrest and incarceration; escape to Greece.	Aboard drifting boat on the Aegean; police arrest and incarceration.
14. M. G., 17,5 years old	Three-year negative experience in Iran.	In Athens: exploitation by fellow Afghans, who stole the last of his money.
15. A. P., 17 years old	Negative experiences in Iran; difficult journey to Greece due to prolonged captivity in Istanbul.	In Athens: Rough sleeping in a park; fear of attacks by right-wing extremists.

The Methodological Framework – The Biographical Method

As a research method tool, the biographical method was used and the accounts of 15 young mostly illiterate Afghans, officially minors. They were from 15 to 18 years old, though they do not always disclose their actual age. Even before they had decided to seek refuge in Europe had been refugees in Iran or Pakistan for a long period of their lives. Selection criteria for refugee research subjects were the country of origin (Afghanistan), the availability and accessibility for participation in the research.

The biographical method was chosen because it aims to understand the special ways in which individuals experience and register wider statutory practices and social logic (Michelson, 2011; Ruppert Johnson, 2003). McAdams (2001) perceives life story as an internalized and developing narration of self that embodies the restructured past, the perceived present and the anticipated future. In any case, it is clear that the narrated experience is not identified directly with or related to the lived experience. The biographical method, almost from its emergence, was criticized mainly for inherent empiricism and generally for being unscientific. However, as there has been an increasing realization of the importance of up till then neglected aspects for the researcher, the research subject and the research process itself (Bertaux, 1974; 1980; Ochs & Capps, 1996), the biographical method has been increasingly adopted in the social sciences and used extensively and systematically (Dominice, 2000; Karpiak, 2003).

The Research Process and its Limitations

The research took place in two stages with the permission of the founding member and director of Arsis, who supervises and co-ordinates the operation of the reception centre and then in consultation initially with the psychologist and finally with the social worker at the centre in Makrinitsa. In the first pilot stage (October-November 2012) seven life stories were recorded which highlighted new thematics and points that needed further analysis. Later, in light of the peculiarities, particularities and new sub-themes that emerged in the first pilot phase, a second phase ensued (February-April 2013) for the next eight life stories. These narratives lasted 2-3 hours each. Due to insufficient knowledge of the Greek language of the narrators and complete lack of knowledge of the informants' mother tongue Dari and/or Farsi on the part of the researchers, all the life stories of the Afghan informants (with the exception of two that were given in Greek and in English) were conducted with the help of an Iranian doctor who acted as interpreter. In this way, the speech of the narrators is doubly intermediated, first, through the interpreter and then through the authors. However, this double intermediation is the only way in which the refugees can express themselves and make themselves visible. On the other hand, their experiences can be used as a primary source of approach to and re-evaluation of the modern social process.

The findings from the life stories, which were processed using the content analysis method, were divided into categories according to the research questions. The categories were defined as accurately as using Berelson (1971) as a guide, whereby, if different researchers analyze the same content, they will create the same categories. Finally, in the content analysis of the life stories, the researchers heeded Silverman's (2000) advice that the live, authentic communication between the researchers and the researched should be reflected in the classification and analysis of the research findings.

The Research findings
Tracing Problematic Context in the Participants' Accounts
Before the refugee experience: in the country of origin

When the narrators refer to their families' and their own experiences, the dominant feeling in their account is insecurity and generally depreciation of human existence and human rights:

> *"When your country is at war or like at war or there is a dictatorship, like the Taliban in Afghanistan, you don't have any rights – there is no such thing. First of all, your life is not important for anyone. You leave your home in the morning and you don't know if you're going to be back alive. [...] Life is nothing. Nobody cares. They don't even let you live wherever you like, work in peace, have money, lead a decent life, be educated, get married to whoever you want and whenever you want, believe in the religion you want, decide yourself on what is important in your life. The Taliban don't want people to go to school, to be able to think. They want people to be like animals so that they can be manipulated, so that they will not object to not having rights or to being violated."* (M.T., 17 years old).

Afghanistan, under the Taliban, became known worldwide for its extreme religious fanaticism, a country where anything perceived by the Taliban leadership as secular and as being against the Islamic precepts, as they view them, suffered from their destructive frenzy. Even education, viewed as a secular –therefore not moral– institution, was banished from children's everyday lives, who were only allowed or rather forced to study in Quran Schools, where preachers professed the singularity of the Muslim religion, the superiority of its believers, and the supreme value of the elimination of the infidels. The upbringing of

children in such a context resulted in the (usually) unshakable internalization of the repulsion towards the infidel "other", as a dangerous miasma that must be eradicated – at all costs. Kindness –as radiance or as practical externalization of spirituality– beyond the Islam is inconceivable.

> *"In Afghanistan, I didn't go to school. I only went to the Quran School, where they taught us the Quran in Arabic. You are not allowed to translate it, to understand it. We used to talk about it all the time and the teacher would tell us that it is the only right thing and those who don't believe in it are evil and dangerous people and want to harm us, that's why we need to stop them. They taught us that any Muslim who kills the infidels is a holy man and God will reward him. [...] And, of course, we believed all that, as they constantly repeated it. It's like an everyday brainwash that lasts your whole life, when you live there."* (M.G., 17, 5 years old).

The children's compulsory attendance is considered a rather unnecessary luxury. Every person, regardless of age, is an indispensable labor asset for every family, whose survival depends on every member's contribution. Children from an early age embrace this as an inevitable and self-evident reality, as shown in the following extract:

> *"In Afghanistan, except for the Quran School, which we had to attend, we didn't really go to school. Most of us, like me, never learned to read or write. There is a lot of poverty and parents –if they are alive– care for what their children will offer to them and not what they will offer to their children, unlike what happens in Europe. So, children from a very young age learn to work. They can't do otherwise because it is more important to bring home some*

money. How else can the family get by?" (T.N., 13 years old).

Even more, children in Afghanistan are reared in accordance with a culture of uncritical acceptance of and uncritical submission to their elders, as a sign of respect, obedience and discipline.

"In general children are quite often beaten up and no respected at all because they are children and grownups don't believe they have the same rights as them. And us kids grow up with deep respect for our elders because we learn that the older you are the wiser you get, in contrast to what I see in Europe, where children have more rights and are also respected by their elders." (M.G., 17, 5 years old).

For all these reasons, in accordance with M.G.'s succinct words *"it is tough being a child in Afghanistan"*.

Added to the child's undeniable submission due to rigid inter-generational inequalities is the undeniable gender inequality due to equally rigid gender inequalities as reported by the 17-years-old H.M. in his life story.

"For women things are really bad. They learn to have no opinion and to obey their father or husband. My mother was married to my father, who was her cousin, much older and she had a tough life, just at home with her husband and her children. And now that she's in Germany, that's what she keeps saying to us when we speak on the phone. That she learned nothing in her life so as to work independently out in society even if she really wanted it and that her parents ruined her life forever and she cries all the time."

Indeed, women's adverse social living conditions include domestic violence, abductions and rapes by armed individuals,

trafficking and use in negotiations between families who resolve difference and debts. It is not rare for them to be forced into underage marriages (HRW, 2013a; UNAMA, 2013). In Afghanistan, of course, if you happen to be a child and female, then things are really tough according to the following account.

"And if you are a girl in Afghanistan you've gotta ask permission even to drink water. You have no rights at all. Even now that things are a bit better, the men in the family decide from a very early age, who you will be married to and how much money they'll make out of it. It's as if girls didn't exist." (M.G., 16 years old).

On the refugee routes: roads, limits, overcomings

In the above-mentioned sociopolitical conditions, in Afghanistan, the refugee decision looks like a one-way street. The neighboring countries, Iran in particular, are the least difficult solution for the vast majority of the narrators. Even though there aren't any military conflicts, daily life is not easy at all (HRW, 2013c). Therefore, a new refugee decision becomes a one-way street again. This time to countries where they have heard that the living conditions are more humane:

"I heard that in Europe people have jobs and homes. And that children go to school every day and don't have to work like we do and thought I'd like to go there too, live like a human being. [...] I'd heard that the journey was dangerous and that not everybody gets there alive. But I'd never imagined it would be that difficult." (M.T., 17 years old).

To start with, it is necessary to collect a large amount of money for the trip and find reliable traffickers for its realization, both arduous processes. After that, the

difficulties of the trip are gradually increasing as the refugees need to cross the first borders, the Iranian-Turkish ones, under the threat of constant gunfire; in appalling conditions of mountain passage in the Turkish mainland; with their detention in *samavats*, a kind of human bodies storehouses, where traffickers practically pile up "illegal" immigrants, until they forward them to their next destination, provided that they first get the promised amount of money; with their perilous attempt to get to Greece, the "first gate" of the European Union, crossing either the Evros River or the Aegean Sea, on age-old, half-wrecked, overloaded small boats. During the whole refugee trip, the precariousness of life is repeatedly ascertained because of general disrespect for human rights.

> *"I was in danger of losing my life so many times that now I find it hard to believe I'm still alive. If basic human rights were respected by more people, such things would never happen to anyone."* (M.T., 17 years old).

After the refugee trip: the host country

On arrival of the refugee subjects in Europe, an important circle of their refugee experience comes to an end. A new one starts: the contact with the new host society, the new culture, that of the Western World, which they longed for before they met it in flesh.

The reception of the local (Greek) society to the newly arrived Afghans played an important role in the way they perceive their relation to it. In the narrative of some of the informants one can spot (to a limited degree in terms of numbers) positive experiences. On the other hand, most narratives are full of traumatic experiences of rejection, both on the part of government officials (mostly Greek police), the general public and by

society as a whole. However, their negative experiences in the host society do not come exclusively from locals. They experience exploitation from more established immigrants in Greece, and also from their fellow countrymen and fellow Muslims. It is not unusual for the latter to snatch their last savings, for use in their longed for escape to the much desired North Western Europe. Their parents' houses in their homeland are sold or their life savings are conceded to a potential intermediary who is full of promises. However, their hope of being transferred to their personal Promised Land proves to be futile to the narrators' great disappointment. The painstakingly amassed amount of money disappears while they themselves remain in the country of residence from which, they are trying, in vain, to escape:

> *"My mother wanted me to leave (Iran) at all costs and come to Europe. She told an uncle of mine to sell our house in Afghanistan for €12,000 and so raise the money for me to come to Europe and then bring my family. The trafficker, who was also from Afghanistan, and did this job tricked her, took all her money and disappeared. (….) Since then I've realized that you've got to watch your back even from your own people."* (A.M., 15 years old).

Learning New Frames of Reference, Transformational Wider Mental Habits and New Conceptual Constructions

In this way, those who have similar personal experiences or hear about such experiences from others, soon reconsider their original beliefs and unshakeable convictions that their teacher in the Koran school instilled into their minds and hearts. These were the animosity and dangerousness of non-Muslim infidels and the a priori virtue of all

fellow Muslims. The words they heard, packed into the poor religious school, proved to be if not deliberate lies, then at least completely irrelevant to the multi-faceted reality and the complicated world of human relations.

> *"On this trip, I feel for the first time that I have got to know the world. (...) I realized that what I learned at the school had nothing to do with reality. (...) I found out in admiration that there were very nice people who weren't Muslims. To my surprise, I found out that there are Muslims who are not good people. It seemed to me that my world had turned upside down."* (M.N., 15 years old).

In this last extract, we see a rejection of the narrators' initial mistaken frame of reference, in other words, the uncritical acceptance of the views of compact homogenised religious groups. In fact, the case of this particular narrator is quite characteristic, as during his detention in the small town of Komotini he came into contact with Canadian Christian preachers and made his first steps towards Christianity. In his country of origin, he would probably not have escaped from being stoned (UNHCR, 2010). In his host country though, he learned to enjoy the privilege of (religious) freedom and make considerable steps towards a new religion. On many nights, the Bible, instead of the Koran is his favourite bedtime reading as according the narrator: *"it is proper for anyone who lives in a country to learn about its religion and if you think it's good, why not embrace it?"* Much more than just the learning of new frames of reference, many narrators present the transformation of wider mental habits and conceptual constructions. This transformation concerns exactly the points which in their country of origin and the intermediate refugee station, Iran, proved to be particularly problematic, such as the

emphasis on human rights, the supreme defense of human life in all its dimensions of freedom and value. In addition, there is a change in the way childhood/youth is perceived, acknowledging the rights they themselves have as young people and vindicating these rights. Finally, there is a new outlook on gender relations and the equality of rights.

> *"I am astonished that life here has value. Of course, people are killed on a personal level, but the state has laws to protect people's lives. (...) In our country, the state itself doesn't care. (....) You're not sure of anything and you have no rights to anything and I don't want me or my family to live like that."* (A.P., 17 years old).

In addition, through a comparison of the two worlds' abstract and schematic perceptions, the East and West the differences can be seen and a new conceptual model of perception between childhood and child age is adopted.

> *"What impresses me here in Europe, and it's quite different from my country, is that children can organize their own lives; that they will get up in the morning, have breakfast, go to school, get back in the afternoon. They will find the time to do their homework, get some rest or see their friends. Their parents take good care of them and talk nice to them, they listen to what they want and don't impose their opinions on them. I think I like this better and when I have children of my own, that's how I want them to grow up."* (T.N., 13 years old).

The embrace of a new outlook on gender relations can be seen in the majority of the narrators. They compare the overwhelmingly large proportion of female illiteracy in their country of origin with the equality of rights, access to education, and the woman's position in the West. They then

choose the western model of equality and emancipation, in contrast with the traditions they were taught in their own culture, as shown in the following extract:

> *"I like that boys and girls see each other her. They go to school together, they don't live separately every day. (…..) Girls go to school and are well educated and do important things in their lives and help the family better. Their voice counts because they know what to say. (…) I would definitely like my wife to have had an education."* (M.N., 15 years old).

In addition, most narrators, at least those who weren't totally overwhelmed by the weight of their crushing, boundary experiences of refugeeism and who managed up to a point to overcome the consequent adversities which is neither generally true not self-evident, totally reevaluate themselves. They gain self-confidence and improve their self-image: *"If I've made it so far, I can make it further"* is A.L.'s feeling, which is articulated in different ways but to the same effect by other narrators as well. In fact, quite a few of them agree on the important role played by the difficulties they had during their long refugee experience and the strategies they developed to face them, as shown by A.A.'s life story: *"The hardships I have been through so far are my life's rock."*

Discussion and Conclusions

The geographical transitions of the refugees are often concurrent with a variety of inner psychological transitions and transformations due to the new frames of reference with which they come into contact, their comparison to their former culture and finally, the formation of new mental attitudes. There are new frames of reference and new mental attitudes – among others – religious matters, gender, and intergenerational relations and generally an adoption of human rights as a condition *sine qua non,* for the restoration of respect for human existence.

Thus, the initial mistaken frames of reference of most of the narrators, in which there is an acceptance of the views of compact homogenised religious groups and the manichaeist conflict between "good" selves and "bad" others are rejected. The uncritical adoption of the religious teachings in the Quran school, because of the established practice of brainwashing, is slowly replaced by a critical check of the teachings which are proved to be untrue in everyday life abroad. The religious "other" not only seems less dangerous, but also proves to be friendly. The new mental perception of the world which spreads out before the refugee narrators is totally different from that which they had before their refugee journey.

Furthermore, woman's status in Afghanistan is nullified and a substantial number of women experience the physical and psychological violence of the male dominated theocratic society as correct and totally in line with the existing rules of ceremonial law. As the refugee subjects come into contact with new more democratic approaches to gender relations, they reflect on and redefine their own attitudes in a more flexible and equal way.

Regarding intergenerational relations in Afghanistan, the children living in a society where ceremonial law still prevails, with its morbid aspects, do not always precisely know their rights and in this way, the domestic uncritical and submissive acceptance of adult members is considered to be a matter of essential and unconditional respect. In the new host country, young Afghans come into contact with the way Europeans deal with people of their age, where their opinion has power and their voice is articulated more strongly and is better listened to. At a younger age, they are recipients of respect, a fact that impressed

all the narrators who desired something similar for themselves and for their future children.

Beyond the transformation on a mentality level, as in the previously mentioned, as examples, conceptual fields in cases where the refugee subjects are not totally overwhelmed by the weight of their crushing, boundary experiences of refugeeism, they develop a positive self-image, in the sense of self confidence, self-support through transcending themselves. It is in these cases that the self-image guides the refugee subjects towards being available for future action for the common good. They escape the victim role and claim a fairer redistribution of social goods for themselves and for the wider social whole.

The participants' cognitive and emotional journey towards transformative learning, according to the research findings, seems to pass through a series of different reflective stages. The initial, to a certain extent, superficial reflections focus equally on life in the places of origin and on their migrant experience. These gradually evolve into deeper thoughts and questions about different aspects of life, both in the country of origin and the host country. Thus, following Mezirow's typology reflections (1991), the findings indicate that the initial thoughts of the subjects were content reflections, reflections that focused solely on the content of previous experience. These reflections are progressively enriched with process reflections, which focus on managing experiences that ultimately serve as a source of empowerment for their owner. The last step concerns premise reflections. These are reflections on not only the specific experience, but in general, on mental habits and perspectives that have influenced both the person themselves and wider social groups.

The findings revealed that research subjects developed a critical approach to a range of opinions and attitudes associated

with the lives of members of the dominant group in the country of origin. At the same time, they have identified the mechanisms, family and religion etc., through which these mental constructs are passed to them. The development of the premise reflections according to Mezirow (1991) is the one that leads to TL, since it has the power to change previous mental habits, beliefs and behaviors. Conversely, if the individual stays at the content and process reflections stage, it is not certain that they will eventually achieve cognitive transformations, although each type of reflection is likely to generate new questions in turn which may lead to the next stochastic stage. The research subjects, on reaching the stage of premise reflections, can go on to a next stage of cognitive development, which, according to Sharan (2004), is a result of TL. Furthermore, some of the research subjects expressed the desire to engage in future social action and this confirms the evolution of their thinking and surpassing of previous cognitive frames of reference. Banks (1998) states that taking social action in a multicultural environment marks the transcendence of a unicultural reference framework and the development of intercultural skills and references. Therefore, based on the research findings, it appears that the disorienting dilemma created by the refugee experience, through premise reflections, may lead to TL, and cross-cultural awareness.

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As this research is a case study, the above findings and conclusions cannot be generalized, as is the case in all qualitative research. Thus, there is a need to conduct similar studies to further investigate the relationship of refugeeism and TL and further explore certain questions. Refugees' additional, problematic, original frames of reference and their relationship with the political, social, economic and religious context of the country of origin and the host country is one such question. There are cases where the respective politico-social conditions, as experienced by the individual refugee subject instead of highlighting the original problematic frames of reference, strengthen and enhance them. If this is the case, the effect this might have on that refugee and their social environment is another area for investigation. Additionally,

what, if any, are the limits to the refugee subjects' internal transformation, in cases where the boundary experiences of life inherent in refugeeism lead to despair, depression and resignation? The relationship between the refugee experience and TL is still, to some extent, terra incognita. Further investigation is merited into the lesser known aspects of internal fine processes in a large traveling population, which, essentially, is being persecuted.

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