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Lived experiences of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in the UK: Migration and identity

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Abstract

Sri Lankan Tamil refugees (SLTRs) have lived in the United Kingdom in substantial numbers for about three decades. However, they remain under-represented in academic and public discourse, and little is known about their migration experiences. This study examined first-hand accounts of such experiences, with special attention paid to identity and acculturation. Data were collected through four semi-structured interviews and analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The results suggest that SLTRs' experience of conflict as an imposed life disruption continues to shape their adaptation, identity, and meaning-making ("Afflicted life"). Changing social identities mediate protection from, as well as risk of, trauma. SLTRs try to remedy the socio-economic and emotional losses suffered in the conflict, but achieve only a partial compensation. Consequently their repair efforts are a source not only of positive emotions but also of dissatisfaction ("Living past"). Finally, participants' sense of belonging and quest for home represent a challenging socio-emotional process in which they continue to engage even decades after migration ("Continuing quest for home"). This nuanced analysis of how the past continues to shape lived experience, contributes to the under-developed literature on qualitative psychological investigations of acculturation, research on forced migration, and the establishment of IPA in social psychology.

K E Y W O R D S

acculturation, identity, migration, qualitative study, refugees, Sri Lanka, UK

INTRODUCTION

For some people, migration is a largely ordinary experience (Nowicka, 2007). For others, especially those who are forced to leave their country of origin, it is life-changing. The numbers of refugees have increased sharply over the past decade, which included the so-called refugee/migration crisis in 2015 (UNHRC, 2020, p. 18) and war in Ukraine. In the United Kingdom (UK), there are debates about current asylum policy ("After UK asylum bill", 2023; "How many Ukrainian refugees", 2022) but also a long tradition of providing help to asylum-seekers and refugees. A relatively large group of Tamil refugees came to the United Kingdom during the civil war between the majority Sinhalese national government and Tamil rebels in Sri Lanka, between 1983 and 2009.[1] For an overview of the conflict and the complex relationship of the Tamils and Sinhalese, see Chattoraj (2017, 2022) or Jones (2020). Sri Lankan Tamil refugees (SLTRs) in the United Kingdom have remained largely unremarked by public or academic attention and their experiences understudied (Aspinall, 2019; Cowley-Sathiakumar, 2008; Hirsch, 2017), in contrast to other countries with large Tamil communities where SLTRs received more attention (George, 2013; Grønseth, 2006; Ratnamohan et al., 2018). This study aims to elucidate forced migration experiences, psychological acculturation and adaptation, and sense-making of traumatic experiences among SLTRs in the United Kingdom.

Theories of identity and acculturation have been deployed in exploring the socio-psychological aspects of migration. Influenced by postmodern ideas, identities have been conceptualized as flexible, fluid, and unceasingly interacting with the outside world (Howard, 2000, pp. 385–387). This raises important questions about how these changes occur, and how social interaction and the wider environment influence identities. Recently, the "social identity model of identity change" (SIMIC) has explored identity change using the social identity framework (Haslam et al., 2008; Jetten & Panchana, 2012). This theory arose from research on significant life changes/transitions and aims to explain individual differences in people's adaptation to these. Applying this model to trauma, Muldoon et al. (2019) proposed three pathways of "trauma – identity – adaptation" interplay. The "identity continuity hypothesis" proposes that trauma will have a greater negative effect if it undermines valued social identities. The "social identity gain hypothesis" proposes that new social identities can be a resource for personal wellbeing and resilience; and the "identity revitalisation hypothesis" links the SIMIC model with post-traumatic growth theory, arguing that growth will occur if one is enabled to re-establish existing identities following trauma, or to forge new ones (Muldoon et al., 2019, p. 315). Muldoon et al. draw from a wide pool of qualitative and quantitative studies to illustrate how changes in social identity after traumatic experiences influence trajectories of adaptation. This perspective is unique in linking individual experiences with social identities and explaining individual variations in experiences of the same phenomena. Although there is overlap with previous theories in certain elements of SIMIC (cf. Breakwell, 1986; Vignoles, 2011), it elaborates on the specifics of the trauma – self – society triangle in identity change and therefore represents a particularly useful perspective for exploring refugee identity.

Additionally, researchers have examined the ethnic and national identities of migrants. Ethnic identity (EI), as a form of social identity, is dynamic (Phinney, 1989) and in migration studies usually denotes one's ties with one's home country and culture. In contrast, national identity (NI) often refers to immigrants' relationship with the host country and characterizes one's sense of connection/belonging to a group which defines itself as a nation (Connor, 1978; Geertz, 1963). Such an approach, however, risks overlooking migrants' national identification with their home countries, which may have changed rather than disappeared. Kelman (1969) distinguished sentimental and instrumental NI. Sentimental NI is characterized by attachment to the nation as to something that is an authentic part of the self, representing one's personal identity. Instrumental NI refers to a

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[1]According to community estimates from 2008, there were about 150,000 SLTs living in the UK (Dissanayake, 2008). Others have suggested that the number could be as high as 250,000 (Velamati, 2009) and that this has risen over subsequent years through marriage and family repatriation (Jones, 2020). It is unclear what proportion of SLTs represent refugees because consistent statistics do not exist (Orjuela, 2011).

connection to the nation as to the entity that helps meet one's needs, corresponds with one's interests and where loyalty to the group depends on its ability to facilitate achievement of individual goals (Kelman, 1997, p. 173). This qualitative distinction refines NI beyond quantitative measures of the extent of national identification.

Identity change among migrants happens when they meet people from different cultures – in acculturation. The dominant approach in acculturation research today is Berry's framework (Berry, 1997) in which acculturation is a bi-dimensional process. The first dimension represents an individual's desire to maintain heritage culture, and the second their desire for contact with, and participation in, the majority society[2] (or their adoption of the host culture, Bourhis et al., 1997). A positive orientation towards both is often associated with positive acculturation outcomes (Berry et al., 2006).

Most acculturation studies use quantitative methods, typically questionnaires. Consequently, the field lacks a deeper understanding of acculturation processes (Broesch & Hadley, 2012; Chirkov, 2009b). The perspectives of migrants themselves and their subjective lived experiences are under-researched (Brown et al., 2016; Chirkov, 2009b). Moreover, migration studies often subsume refugees under the broader migrant category (Allen et al., 2006; Chimienti et al., 2019; Kuo, 2014). This overlooks phenomena that are unique to refugees (Hirsch, 2017; Kebede, 2010). To remedy these drawbacks and improve the applied value of migration research, researchers have recommended more qualitative research (Chirkov, 2009a; Matsudaira, 2006; Strang & Ager, 2010).

This study aims to contribute to the social psychology literature on acculturation and identity processes among SLTRs by systematically analysing refugee experiences, adding this important first-hand perspective and pointing towards the limits of existing knowledge. We examined how SLTRs in the United Kingdom made sense of their experience, including critical events in Sri Lanka, transition, and the repercussions of their refugee experience for their current lives. Thereby, we sought to understand how identity change and adaptation after traumatic experiences (see Muldoon et al., 2019), as well as more general psychological acculturation after migration (see Berry, 1997; Chirkov, 2009b), play out in SLTRs' lived experience.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009, 2022) was selected as the most suitable approach. IPA's three theoretical pillars – phenomenological, hermeneutic, and idiographic (for details, see Smith et al., 2009, pp. 11–39) – permit exploration of meaning-making processes of individuals within their particular socio-cultural contexts (Shaw, 2001). This also makes IPA suitable for investigating phenomena that have been little explored (Reid et al., 2005). In IPA, participants' expertise in the phenomena they experienced is combined with the researcher's expertise. This is useful in linking theoretical and subjective horizons, enabling the researcher to illustrate and deepen the content of existing theories (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Smith, 2004, p. 43) beyond pre-defined categories. It also allows non-Western refugee experiences to be heard in their own terms, as idiographic phenomenological exploration taps into individuals' ways of experiencing and meaning-making (Riggs & Coyle, 2002). We tried to show the potential of IPA[3] in exploring social-psychological phenomena of migration and acculturation, which only a few studies have done (Hunt et al., 2021; Timotijevic & Breakwell, 2000). Findings of this study might be useful, for example, in counselling and integration support services targeted at refugees.

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[2]These two dimensions consist of attitudes (or preferences) and behaviours (or actual acts), which in turn form the basis of four possible acculturation outcomes, which may be described as acculturation strategies: assimilation (when an individual has low interest in heritage culture maintenance and high interest in contact with and participation in the host culture); integration (when an individual seeks both maintenance of the heritage culture and contact/participation with the host culture); marginalization (when an individual seeks neither heritage culture maintenance nor interaction with the host culture); and separation (when an individual avoids involvement with the host culture but has high interest in maintaining connection with the heritage culture) (Berry, 1997).

[3]IPA has been used most frequently in health (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p. 520), clinical and, increasingly, in social psychology (Howitt, 2010, p. 271). It has become, especially in the UK, a well-established and recognized qualitative approach in psychology research (Smith & Eatough, 2018).

METHOD

Participants

The interviewees were four SLTRs who live in South-East England. The sample size is typical of IPA (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Spiers & Riley, 2018) and permits rich and in-depth analysis of lived experience with an idiographic focus. IPA's focus on depth rather than generalization requires a fairly homogeneous sample, so we recruited specifically participants who left Sri Lanka due to conflict-related reasons, as adults (18 years or older), and came to the United Kingdom no later than the 1990s. The interviews took place from January 2017 to January 2018 and were conducted in English. Participants' pseudonyms and demographic details are presented in the table below (Table 1).

Design and materials

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to speak freely about their experiences of conflict, migration and adaptation (e.g., How do you remember your first months in the United Kingdom? What was it like for you to be a refugee here?). This approach allows the participant to focus on those aspects of an experience which are most important to them while also maintaining focus on the research question (Smith et al., 2009).

Procedure and analysis

Participants were recruited through leaflets and personal invitations in Tamil cultural centres/associations. Two interviews took place at Tamil centres and two at participants' homes. The interviews were recorded on a digital audio recorder, transcribed verbatim, and analysed following Smith et al. (2009). Each transcript was read several times, and annotations were made to record remarkable aspects of what the participant said, how they said it, and which concepts were invoked. Gradually, these notes were worked into more interpretative themes capturing significant features of the participant's lived experience, with a view to our research questions. These themes were further integrated, differentiated, and connected until a parsimonious structure of superordinate and subordinate themes seemed to summarize the participant's lived experience. Following IPA's idiographic commitment, each interview was analysed separately before the cross-case analysis, in which convergence and divergence between participants were examined. These insights informed a final tabulation of group experiential themes (GETs) to systematize the most important connections between interviews.

RESULTS

The three GETs were "Afflicted life", "Living past", and "Continuing quest for home". Each had several subordinate themes, presented in Table 2. SLTRs' immediate experiences of the civil war are

TABLE 1 Participants.

Name	Gender	Age	Occupation	Family	Interview details
Sudarini	Female	60	Administrative worker	Married, 3 children	January 2017 At participant's home
Tamil	Male	42	Factory worker	Married, 2 children	May 2017 At community centre
Khusal	Male	53	Engineer	Married, 1 child	May 2017 At public library
Anil	Male	48	Factory worker	Married, 2 children	January 2018 At community centre

TABLE 2 Overview of themes.

Afflicted life	Living past	Continuing quest for home
Being subject to traumatizing events	Pervasive loss	Self as ever rooted in Sri Lanka
One's world overthrown	Conflict as unhealed scar	Negotiating one's place in UK society
Transition as struggle with the unknown	One's experience as source of empathy	

captured in GET *Afflicted life*. These are characterized by the intrusive nature of the conflict, violation of participants' agency, victimization, and subsequent struggle during transition. The second GET, *Living past*, points to the residual elements of conflict that participants experience in their lives to this day. Finally, *Continuing quest for home*, explores participants' unceasing efforts for belonging and desire to renew their ties with Sri Lanka.

Afflicted life

Afflicted life portrays participants' perspectives on what happened to them during the conflict. They felt that their microcosm was overthrown, their lives disrupted, and their scope for free action severely curtailed. They expressed a strong sense of being subject to ongoing events. After their flight, they continued to struggle with the unknowns that opened before them.

All participants found their memories of the conflict unforgettable. Sudarini relates minute-by-minute memories of the critical events. She was 17 when the conflict erupted.

Sudarini: But for me, ehm, I mean what happened that night, in August 1977, that's something you never forget, because that's one of those very traumatic events in your life. I remember every single minute of what happened that night, the 22nd of August.

Her memories are 'impossible to forget' and represent a ground-zero point in her past. Although Sudarini's family was connected to the United Kingdom before the conflict and her parents were toying with the idea of emigrating, she and her sister did not want to leave Sri Lanka.

Khusal, after describing how he survived an attempt by rioters to burn him and his family alive in their house, speaks in unambiguous terms:

Khusal: …And at the time, there was a lot of stories, not stories really, lot of, um disappearing of young boys. So, I was really looking to get out of the country.

Events around him and what he survived led to his decision to leave. Leaving became the only way to preserve his life. Participants' descriptions of the conflict reveal a sense of deviation from something they considered and expected to be the natural flow of their lives. Tamil is very vocal about the disruption caused by the conflict. His studies were interrupted by an unjust imprisonment.

Tamil: I wanted to continue my… because I was so interested about Biological; Zoology and Chemistry my favourite subject at the time and I wanted to carry on and so I came to Colombo and when I stayed there, there was one round up and the military come and round up and we stayed in a hotel, like bed and breakfast and midnight they round up and take everybody in the police station.

He adds later in the interview that more important things may have been disrupted by the conflict.

Tamil: And my childhood as well, and I think childhood is very important in human psychology, isn't It?

Interviewer: It is.

Tamil: If something goes… It's like a memory, and if something goes wrong in the time then rest of the life is going wrong, right?

Interviewer: Well, it can be. Everything…

Tamil: Yeah, unless you get a good guidance and things when they grow up, it can go wrong very easily, isn't it?

He perceives his childhood as having been spoiled and uses some common psychology concepts to support his view. He then addresses the interviewer directly, expecting confirmation. Tamil describes what the facts were from his perspective: the conflict negatively influenced his childhood, interrupting what was meant to happen and leading to what was never meant to happen. In this way, the interviewer might be described as becoming a witness to his drama.

Either directly through the loss of their physical home or through the events around them, participants experienced a profound loss of stability and security. Sudarini explains how this loss further affected her.

Sudarini: So about a year after this happened I tried to do my A levels in Sri Lanka when the schools re-opened but I couldn't… because we were… we lost quite a lot of things in the riots and the fire and everything, including books, …so we were displaced, we lived around different friends until we found a house to rent in the city, in Colombo and I was able to carry on going to school but by then I had lost quite a lot of ground and time and motivation really…

She not only lost the material means to study (e.g., books), or the ability to attend school, but more importantly she had lost a lot of ground. She was set back, despite some restoration of normalcy later after the riots (reopening of schools and finding a new house). As she added elsewhere, *I tried to carry on and do some exams… but couldn't concentrate.* She found it challenging to resume her studies without the stable foundations of the home she had lost.

Another challenging phase of participants' lives began when they left Sri Lanka. They felt that moving from their home was not a personal choice. Apart from the immediate unknowns of the new environment, many unanswered questions about their future loomed large. Anil was encouraged by a friend to come to the United Kingdom. The excerpt below shows the contrast between the peaceful and happy life that his friend described, and the United Kingdom as a country he neither knows nor knows how to live in. He struggles to express in words what was happening inside him.

Anil: Uh, first day hmm, even I don't know how to say. Uh, I think one safe place in the world but I didn't know about the UK as well. I don't know about the country look like the outside or what we are going to do. … You know, I feel it only in coming here or before I come here, my, my friend summoned me here you know. … They, they… I talked to them over the phone before I come and visit. Okay, they live here, they work here and they have a happy life or a peaceful life. … You know. Even I didn't plan to come to UK.

Speaking metaphorically, all he could hold on to was one phone call with his friend. The stakes of his gamble were high, as shown in the repeated phrase, *I didn't know.* Anil was asked, after he spoke about his perilous transition, whether there was anything that was straightforward.

Anil: We can't speak proper English then but we can, we can manage to communicate. You know what I mean?

Interviewer: Yes.

Anil: If you aren't used to learn somewhere, that's why we worked hard to learn a totally different language, nobody to catch. Um, in school life we studied second language is English. … That's only that easy to understand and easy to catch it. … Yeah. And understand like mostly the same like Sri Lanka in UK, driving wise on the right hand side very well yeah. … Uh, something like that. Sri Lanka also used to be British Colony. … Um, that's why most people like it here.

The English language and British culture were unfamiliar to Anil in some of their aspects and familiar in others. Similarities between the two countries made Anil's transition easier and the United Kingdom more likeable. He expressed what other participants also did – that they knew the language and culture before their arrival, but perhaps in a different form, sometimes idealized or inaccurate. Their original picture met with the reality of the United Kingdom which, at times, resulted in a confusing mixture of familiarity and unfamiliarity.

Living past

Living past captures how the war events and injustice participants experienced remain present in their current lives. For example, Tamil describes the setup of his current life in contrast to what he had in Sri Lanka.

Tamil: So one week I spend the time with my daughter and another week I can't spend my time with my daughter, I need to go work. Because this is the burden on your shoulder for the economic burden. You have to earn the money to feed your family, to run your family, right? … Yeah but, well, in the north part of Sri Lanka we don't have… There lot of people are farmers or they're working in a government office, like teachers or things like that, so there is no night work…

Tamil speaks about his painful separation from his daughter, due to his work schedule. As a result of his flight to the United Kingdom, he lost the Sri Lankan way of living and work-life balance that is its natural complement. He further highlights losses in the realm of relationships.

Tamil: No my parents have passed away. I've got my sister there so I went to see her. It's hard you're living 17 years away from your sister, and when I left my nephew was only six month old.
Interviewer: Oh wow, a baby.
Tamil: Yes. When I went to see now, he's 17 years old, like he's a big man now, so I can't play with him or he can't play with me like uncle and nephew, right? … So we don't have that bond between us. When I go and he is a big guy now, he's got different things to do than what we used to do as child, isn't it?

Tamil finds living far from his family hard. He laments not only the disrupted connection with his sister but also the lost chance to create a relationship with his nephew. As he puts it, they cannot be together as uncle and nephew.

Experiencing losses does not mean their passive acceptance. A need to make up for various deprivations emerged in all interviews. It is characterized by dissatisfaction with the current state and desire to restore what participants used to or expected to have. All participants except Sudarini[4] expressed a wish to maintain Tamil culture and discussed difficulties in doing so in their new UK homes. They highlight that it is impossible to transfer certain aspects of their cultural heritage to the United Kingdom. Facilities (e.g., temples) and community were lost in the conflict; nonetheless, participants tried to redesign their Sri Lankan Tamil lifestyle in the United Kingdom. Anil, for

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[4]Sudarini, in contrast, focused on compensating for her lost educational opportunities.

example, explains that he had to travel to London for access to the temple. In Sri Lanka, it was easily accessible. In a later passage, he reflects on his religiosity and on the opening of a new local temple.

Anil: You know. Uh, that's wonderful; it's okay, not like it used to be. You know it used to be we are very religious there. This has also brought what's happened to us. I say we've grown as well and we have them here.

Although he attributes the new temple to a growth of the community (*we've grown as well and we have them here*), he believes that what happened to them – the conflict – has radically changed religious matters: *it's okay*, *not like it used to be* – the religiosity here is somehow different, presumably weaker or less active since, as he says: *it used to be we are very religious there*. Continuity of religious practice was lost and attempts to restore it in the new environment appear to be an approximation of its original version.

Meanwhile, Sudarini reflects on how the past loss of security and stability (see *Afflicted life*) still affects her.

Sudarini: But it maybe does still always leave you vulnerable. I think everyone, we think of very old ladies who lived through the Jewish, the genocide in Germany, in the forties… You talk to some of them in their nineties and they would still be talking about these days and how they were young and how it affected them. So it's something that you don't want anyone to go through, to be a refugee or to leave your country in circumstances that are traumatic.

She uses the Holocaust as an analogy. Her past trauma was so brutal that it *does still always leave* her vulnerable. The words underscore the permanence of what follows – the vulnerability. Like old Holocaust survivors, she too remembers and remains vulnerable years later.

Another source of emotional pain were the participants' unfulfilled expectations and wishes. Their imagining of what could have been, had there been no conflict, gives rise to an array of challenging emotions in their current lives. For Tamil the odds are quite clear:

Tamil: I gained economic wise my life is better in some way, but I don't think even if I was in Sri Lanka I will have a government job and maybe my life is much easier than that what I'm doing here now. Even my life is more relaxed and happy. I think even my daughter could have a better life in Sri Lanka than here because she would have lot of grandma and aunties and everyone around her but here there is nobody.

He thinks that if the conflict had not happened and he had stayed in Sri Lanka, his life might have been much easier – also for his daughter. That hypothetical betterment hinges on access to a better job and the physical presence of one's wider family.

Sudarini is also aware that her life would have been quite different if she had stayed in Sri Lanka:

Sudarini: So yeah that that feeling of not having had a profession or career that I was probably capable of but then- would I? … Having stayed there, how would I fared with the nationalist feeling? … But there are times when I get very low and think- I could've done this, my life could've been different, I might have been working with animals, might have had more money- ha-ha etc.

Despite being aware of the possible disadvantages of staying in Sri Lanka, and doubts about whether her life would have followed its course in the way she imagines, her thoughts about the life she might have had make her sad: *I get very low.* The sense of loss caused by a disrupted past is clear despite the uncertainty about what exactly was lost.

Finally, the past remains present in participants' lives in a more positive form. They have transformed experiences of suffering into empathy and altruism. When asked why he wanted to help, Anil replied:

Anil: …We were struggling in our life at that time and we didn't get that much help you know. … And struggled lot of time in youth you know. That's where all this I think, why somebody would be struggling in their life, maybe we can help them, we can help them and they can, they can get comfortable and oh they can hold on or whatever. Uh, yeah, that's only why I'm happy to help.

Continuing quest for home

This GET explores the dynamically evolving concept of home in participants' narratives. Looking for a place to call home is linked with a community of others; being part of it, belonging to, or contributing to it. For Khusal, there is a great deal of confusion.

Khusal: I've come here; I've made a good life even though it's far away from home. Sometimes it feels like I'm working for, um, something that isn't for my own people, but then sometimes I think well, who are my own people? Right? I was Sri Lankan who grew up in Colombo. Who are my people? At the end of the day [0:49:53 inaudible in Tamil language] it's a pretty small place.

For Khusal, having a *good life* in the United Kingdom and contributing to UK society feels like it *isn't for my own people*. The people he feels connected to (*my own*) are back in Sri Lanka. Yet, he says, *I was Sri Lankan*, which sounds as though he does not consider himself to be Sri Lankan anymore. The reference to growing up in the capital of Sri Lanka – the city often accused of not being the real Sri Lanka – reflects his doubts about being genuinely Sri Lankan. This remark reveals doubts about his being part of the Sri Lankan people. What naturally follows is the repeated question, *who are my people*?

Participants referred to themselves as irrevocably or forever Sri Lankan. Such a conclusion, however, had to be negotiated in light of the events in Sri Lanka.

Sudarini: So I've most I've my entire adult life in western world, ehm, but the 18 years …and early influences are really important in anyone's life. So your roots will matter, they'll come up and kick you in the bum at some stage one day (ha-ha).

She refers to her roots as something active and important in the later stages of life. This relates to her earlier confession where she explained that originally she tried to divest herself of her heritage.

Sudarini: But it's just that feeling – would we ever be accepted back in our own country? If… And the answer was no because progressively things got worse and then you think of yourself as a British as a, ehm, British person… and I think I found it easier to integrate than if I stayed within my old, narrow culture.

Now, however, she experiences that her roots cannot be reduced to something that relates only to the past. Despite her smooth adaptation, the influences of her roots *are really important… they'll come up*.

Anil came to the United Kingdom after a short period of living in other Asian countries. Like others, he describes a sense of relief upon his escape and arrival in the United Kingdom: *When I come here I feel in my life I don't want to go back to my place*. Although Anil refers to Sri Lanka as "his" place, he initially rejected the idea of going back. Only later did he restore his relationship with Sri Lanka. Below he discusses how he felt when he came to Sri Lanka as a tourist:

Anil: I felt like. From '85, from '83 or whatever that time, to 200- 2009 or we can't think about going back to Sri Lanka or whatever. It's a long time back; you know we go back to Sri Lanka. Really we feel it to be only our place. … But everything is gone off or family not there or friends not there you know.

Anil discovered that certain crucial elements of what once formed his home were no longer present. Despite this loss of home as it used to be, it remains "his place" – he asserts: *Really we feel it.*

Apart from re-negotiating their relationship with Sri Lanka, participants had to find their own way of relating to the United Kingdom. They discussed processing challenging experiences and even conflicting feelings at times. They feel adapted to the United Kingdom, appreciate the new environment, but also feel somewhat uncertain about their place in it.

Most of all participants, Tamil expressed his fondness for Sri Lanka. In respect to the United Kingdom, he presents a committed connection too. This connection, however, is characterized by a sense of responsibility.

Tamil: Yes, I'm proud to be in the society and I do my best to make this country better. I do work hard and I pay the tax and I look after my family, and obey this country's law and order. I like to be a good person for this society.

Tamil wants to be an exemplary citizen. This conveys a sense of duty, but does not show the same emotional language he used when he talked about Sri Lanka – to which he refers as "my country" and "my place". Likewise, he does not speak to feelings of belonging. Juxtaposing his reference to Sri Lanka as "my country", his reference to the United Kingdom as "this society" points to a difference in how he relates to the two countries. His adjustment to the United Kingdom does not mean he has adopted the United Kingdom as his own, but means taking a proactive stance in UK society.

In the context of participants' experience of civil war, it is perhaps unsurprising that a sense that "anything can happen" still occupies a prominent position in their relationships to the outside world. This concern emerged in their reflections on their home in the United Kingdom. They are sensitive to socio-political changes and alert to any potential danger. Sudarini shows that events in her immediate surroundings or in the world globally are very much on her radar.

Sudarini: And the world has shrunk so much. It's unrecognizable to as it was when I was nineteen in the late seventies. I think people are… maybe in last year things started to go backwards a bit. People are certainly getting a bit less tolerant now but we always thought of England as a father land, not a mother land, but Britain was a big power- a global power- the empire- very much… well the Commonwealth countries we, I mean my parents were such Anglophiles. … I've met some wonderful people here and just hope that intolerance that was there in my old country doesn't creep in here eventually and lead to a civil war of some sort.

In saying, *in last year things started to go backwards a bit*, Sudarini refers to Brexit and/or the migrant crisis in 2015. For her, England is a strong "father" expected to be protective of its children. She and her family have always loved England, but now there is a certain doubt about the attitude of the fatherland: *just hope that intolerance that was there in my old country doesn't creep in here…* She fled from intolerance in Sri Lanka, and she worries it could resurface in the United Kingdom and cause another conflict. In her view, intolerance seems to be the inception of war and her insecurity derives from the notion that people in the United Kingdom are becoming less tolerant.

Khusal broaches the topic of current socio-political changes when discussing his future plans. Beneath the surface, there is a sense of volatility and insecurity, reflected in his consideration even of worst-case scenarios.

Khusal: Um… yeah… but also recently, recently, recently… ever since 2016 I guess, there's been a mood of people getting in the more right wing with Brexit and Trump and whatever. So, it's a bit weird right

now. … Yeah. Yeah. Because um, most Brexit voters would say it had nothing to do with racism. I think it does have some… I don't think all of the Brexit voters were racists but I think it has something to do with people feeling that there are too many immigrants in the country. That was a big factor.

For Khusal, the situation is a bit *weird right now*. He is perplexed that people in the United Kingdom feel that there are too many immigrants in the country. He is tentative in his linking of racism and Brexit, but takes Brexit as evidence of an anti-immigrant attitude. He leaves some sentences unfinished, but a concern for the safety of immigrants and people of colour is elaborated later on:

Khusal: But if the ball starts rolling, um, in a way where changes that between towards something like what happened in Germany in the 20th century then that could be quite bad. … And um, there are plenty of people who are saying things today in the media that are a bit worrying.

He says that *if the ball starts rolling*, this could lead to something like the genocide in Germany. The extreme example presumably reflects the intensity of his perception that the world around him is uncertain and insecure. He and people like him might literally become a target at any time – a concern that is heightened by the worrying messages he sees in the media. Concerns for safety in the country where they found asylum were thus part of participants' continuing quest for a sense of home.

DISCUSSION

This study offers a compelling case for studying subjectivity in social psychology using IPA. The analysis of SLTRs' experiences showed that the subjective meanings attached to these experiences have a continuing impact on participants' daily lives and pointed towards possible limitations and refinements of existing theory. Although each participant's lived experience was unique, cross-case analysis converged on a sense that life is deeply and permanently disrupted by the civil war, that the past continues to bear heavily on the present, and that making a new home in the United Kingdom is an ongoing challenge.

Afflicted life

Participants considered themselves subject to the events of war. New social identities (see Tajfel & Turner, 1979) were forcibly introduced (e.g., refugee) and others were changed (e.g., occupational). A sense of loss arose from the inability to live and enact these identities, for example as a professional whose career was disrupted by conflict and displacement. Identity process theory conceptualizes such experiences as identity threat, namely disruption of identity continuity (Breakwell, 1986). Relatedly, the identity continuity hypothesis (Haslam et al., 2008) can be applied to frame participants' experiences. It postulates that identity continuity is facilitated by the number of group identities, that is multiple group identities make it more likely that some will be preserved after a critical life event/transition (Haslam et al., 2008) and that identity continuity plays an important role in well-being and mental health (Jetten et al., 2010; Sani et al., 2008). Extending the application of identity continuity hypothesis beyond health psychology, interventions aimed at refugees could support continuity of subjectively important identities to improve refugees' well-being and adaptation.

Leaving Sri Lanka was portrayed by our participants as something imposed on one's life. From the outside, flight might be perceived as a choice. For example, De Haas (2010) argues that refugees, despite their challenging situations, exercise their agency to the maximum. This does not match our participants' views. The notion of leaving Sri Lanka as inevitable and forced is very important because it frames participants' stories not only in migration but also in post-migration. SLTRs continue to experience dissatisfaction because important aspects of their lives were lost and what they have now remains only a partial compensation, but not a full substitute.

SLTRs faced, shortly after arrival, new unknowns. There were not only perceptions of low cultural distance (see Berry, 1997) between the United Kingdom and Sri Lanka (e.g., similar education systems or driving) but also a widespread experience of the United Kingdom as culturally dissimilar. Some of this can be ascribed to encountering the real United Kingdom, in contrast to concepts they had developed about the United Kingdom in Sri Lanka (e.g., Sudarini was surprised by the small size of houses). Others consist of their subjective experience of how UK society is different overall (see Anil or Tamil's accounts about the different rhythm of UK society). Although familiarity with the United Kingdom was helpful, it did not protect SLTRs from experiencing acculturative stress (Berry, 1970), suggesting that the presence of protective factors should not be overestimated. Confrontation with the unfamiliar may be common to many migration and acculturation experiences, but here it was complicated by participants' prior belief that they – as citizens of a former colony – knew and understood the United Kingdom. Yet, the reality turned out to be perplexingly different.

Living past

Participants' losses cut across various life domains. Their pervasiveness accounts for their lasting effects and becomes most prominent in loss of relationships. This is not an absolute loss – often people are not deceased, but physically distant, and participants felt disconnected from them. Relationships formed in the United Kingdom often did not fully satisfy their relational needs, which raises questions about the quality of – rather than the desire for – intergroup contact (see Berry, 1997; Pettigrew, 2008). Christodoulou (2014) found in his sample of refugees and migrants in the United Kingdom that for 58% of them isolation and loneliness represented the major adaptation challenge. Loneliness is a stressor that has detrimental effects on health (Hawkley et al., 2010). The importance of tackling loneliness among refugees has recently been underscored by a large longitudinal study in Australia. Wu et al. (2020) argued that the loneliness of refugees should be the priority issue for interventions at the later stages of resettlement to prevent mental health deterioration.

All participants had engaged in some compensation for their lost relationships – for example, through participating in Tamil associations. Maintaining Tamil culture in the United Kingdom is framed as an attempt to prevent its absolute loss. They tried to introduce it into their lives mainly to convey Tamil culture to their children (Khusal, Anil, Tamil). However, they face challenges, especially in the differing socio-cultural setup (different rhythm-of-the-year cycle, and temporal and spatial barriers to celebrating Tamil festivals). Whatever the specific losses are for individual participants (not only cultural), they all found their efforts to be a compensation, but not a full substitute. Hence the compensations for past losses are not only a source of positive emotions but also of dissatisfaction and sadness. In contrast to the beneficial effects of culture maintenance (Ward & Kennedy, 1994), our participants suggest that it can also be experienced as frustrating when it seems difficult or a poor imitation of the real thing.

Apart from lost relationships, the participants of this study discussed what might be denoted as "lost life". This includes domains such as education, careers, or socioeconomic status, which participants lost or felt they might have had. Some of these represent participants' preferred possible future selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), which were destroyed in the conflict. It has been experimentally shown that possible future identities are particularly difficult to give up if they were formed as positive (Carroll et al., 2009). Immaterialised expected positive identities that participants had formed back in Sri Lanka still occupy their minds today. They expressed disillusionment about not becoming what they were hoping to become. Importantly, the lost possible identities are also social identities and these significantly influence people's motivation and behaviour (see Cinnirella, 1998). After losing expected future identities, participants made attempts to re-establish or compensate for these. This could be seen, for example, in Anil's regret for losing the traditional communal way of life and his current attempts to recreate this by attending the Sunday Tamil school (similarly Khusal and Tamil). This finding could advance the "identity continuity hypothesis" (Muldoon et al., 2019), which proposes that trauma will have a greater negative effect if it undermines valued social identities. Our findings show that the negative effects of

trauma are also linked to expected identities. Extending the identity continuity hypothesis in this way could contribute to theory advancement and help further successful applications (Steffens et al., 2021).

This theme shows that the lasting effects of forced migration should not be taken lightly. Although on the surface nothing indicates struggle in the lives of SLTRs, they tell us that certain aspects of their lives related to personal and social identities cannot be repaired. Identifying these experiences in a long-settled group of refugees highlights the importance of long-term support for resettled refugees (cf. Wu et al., 2020). Undoubtedly, the paramount consideration must be to attend to the acute needs of refugees in acute crises. However, it is also apparent from the accounts of SLTRs that their needs have changed in the process of adaptation and that they could benefit from further support. Provision of shelter and employment are only the beginning of integration and at later stages, for example, being heard and forming meaningful relationships seem important.

Continuing quest for home

Participants found different aspects of home not only in relation to Sri Lanka but also to the United Kingdom. Their experience of home was complex even many years after their relocation. This complexity of a sense of home among migrants has recently received some attention (Ralph & Staeheli, 2011; Romoli et al., 2022).

Participants seemed quite clear that their home was now in the United Kingdom – they pointed to how they "made" their lives in the United Kingdom, started new families, careers and henceforth belonged in the United Kingdom in some perhaps rational or functional sense (see e.g., Tamil's transactional relating to the United Kingdom). This echoes Kelman's concept of instrumental national identity (1969), with the nation helping people to meet their needs and goals. However, questions remained about what Sixsmith (1986) categorized as social home or social belonging. This was most clearly expressed by Khusal, who asks: *Who are my people?* Participants spoke of (still) being rooted in Sri Lanka and this (despite everything) was an inherent part of who they are. Such a relationship to one's nation Kelman (1969) described as being "sentimental", representing an authentic part of identity.

This fundamental rootedness in Sri Lanka was experienced as something essential to who they are, cannot be removed, and remains with them despite their bad experiences in Sri Lanka (cf. Anil or Sudarini above). A sense of rootedness can be central to people's conceptualisations of home (Sixsmith, 1986). Rootedness has often been contrasted with mobility, as if moving from one's home country precluded feelings of rootedness (Malkki, 1997). But it has also been argued that both roots and routes are important in migrants' sense of home (Ralph & Staeheli, 2011). Participants' initial reaction to the events in Sri Lanka could be characterized as turning away from the country, with feelings of deracination. However, a substantial reformulation of their relationship with Sri Lanka happened over the years. At one level, their sense of home in Sri Lanka remains profoundly shaken and is still in doubt – mainly because their home there as they knew it ceased to exist, and they are aware that the country (in addition to themselves) has changed (cf. Anil: "everything is gone"). Their dynamically evolving relationship with Sri Lanka has, however, survived these losses. They think about returning to Sri Lanka (at least hypothetically), but these thoughts are expressed in dialogue with that new life and their children's lives as embedded in the United Kingdom. Real and imagined journeys back to Sri Lanka point to the endurance of their affiliation and to an enduring feeling of belonging.

Participants' ongoing reconsideration of return was also linked with their uncertainty about their place in the United Kingdom (see, for example, Khusal's concerns about recent socio-political developments, such as Brexit). They were vigilant and concerned about what could happen. This cautious attitude towards the United Kingdom seems to be linked to their past experience of conflict (see Sudarini's explicit statement). Fullilove (2014) suggested that forced relocation leaves people's trust "frayed" and their feelings of attachment ambivalent or limited. Our findings support this notion.

Overall, a certain open-endedness in the question of home is apparent. Home is, and is not, in the United Kingdom and it equally is, and is no longer, in Sri Lanka. While the hope that they might

re-establish a sense of belonging attracts them to return to Sri Lanka, their current life circumstances do not enable them to go back. It appears that belonging to the United Kingdom has not (or at least has not sufficiently) evolved for them. This could be examined more widely, and may have implications for current support systems, given that a stable sense of belonging is considered a precondition for a good quality of life (Anthias, 2006).

All themes highlight the disruptiveness of forced migration. The depth and breadth of this disruption are not immediately obvious. On the surface, all participants are well-integrated and function well in their new home country. However, our analysis shows that this is qualified by some deep-rooted issues. In contrast, a separate IPA study of a group of economic migrants who left Sri Lanka prior to the conflict revealed experiences of accomplishment, smooth transition, and certainty about their place in the United Kingdom (Warren, 2021). Although these findings cannot be generalized, this emphasizes the importance of exploring refugees' experiences specifically and not to subsume them in the broader category of migrants.

REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

By giving voice to the under-studied group of STLRs in the United Kingdom (Aspinall, 2019; Jones, 2020) and examining their lived experience, we offer a detailed study of these particular cases of forced migration as well as contributing to an under-developed literature on qualitative psychological investigations of first-hand experiences of migration and acculturation (see Chirkov, 2009a, 2009b).

We also demonstrate the utility of IPA (Smith et al., 2009, 2022) as an approach in social psychology, specifically the investigation of lived identity (Hunt et al., 2021) and migration experiences. In comparison with an earlier IPA study of refugee experiences (Timotijevic & Breakwell, 2000), our project benefited from a more extensive and mature methodological literature on IPA (e.g., Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Eatough, 2018) and a participant group who had already spent much more time in their new country of residence. This enabled our participants, and thus our analysis, to talk about a more advanced acculturation process from a position of extensive experience of both the Sri Lankan and British settings.

In line with the "identity continuity hypothesis" (Muldoon et al., 2019), we suggest that refugees' existing social identities should be preserved as much as possible in post-migration contexts. SLTRs' accounts show that their lost and unrecovered social identities remain a source of difficult emotions even today. We found that this applies equally to participants' expected but unfulfilled social identities (not only those that once existed back in Sri Lanka). This finding can help develop psychosocial services specifically targeted at this issue (see Steffens et al., 2021 for interventions addressing affected social identities).

We also recommend that services pay more attention to the issue of loneliness among long-settled refugees. Participants discussed very openly that the absence of satisfying new ties highlights for them the loss of relationships in the past (cf. Wu et al., 2020).

Finally, more support in the domain of belonging would be beneficial. Participants shared concerns regarding the UK's current sociopolitical scene and the atmosphere in society in general. They interpret recent developments in the context of their past experiences, and worry that they might become a target once again. This leads to distrust and hinders belonging – an important precondition of adaptation (Anthias, 2006). Several difficulties occurred during the course of this research. Firstly, recruitment of participants was challenging. A key issue revolved around their natural unwillingness to revisit the past, on the basis of which several potential participants declined to participate. The second area of concern was related to participants' worries about the researcher potentially questioning their past political affiliations and engagement. An explicit statement about the non-political nature of this research helped to reassure interested candidates.

Consideration of the researcher's role in the research process is an indispensable part of qualitative research (Finlay, 2009; Watt, 2007). The first researcher (and interviewer) has some family members who are partially Tamil. This "Tamil connection", as one participant called it, helped in the search for

participants, and in building rapport. Not being Tamil, a refugee or a forced migrant means that the interviewer did not have insider access to the experiences in question. However, both researchers share a broader migration experience with SLTRs as both have also experienced the United Kingdom as their new home. Hence, the researchers were neither complete outsiders nor complete insiders, but like guests who were allowed to enter the participants' lifeworld. Inevitably, this means that our interviews and analysis may not be identical to what other researchers would have produced. IPA is open about this double hermeneutic of researchers making sense of participants making sense of experience; in fact, it is an important part of the approach (Smith et al., 2022). But, following good practice in IPA (Smith, 2004, 2011; Smith et al., 2022), we have tried to show that our analysis is firmly grounded in the accounts of all participants, critically interrogated our interpretations, and had the analysis audited externally to ensure rigour and quality.

The findings of this study represent a unique perspective on refugee acculturation and identity, which can be compared with the experience of other (recent) groups of refugees. While it is not expected that findings would generalize unproblematically (see Smith et al., 2022), similarities and dissimilarities could nonetheless be useful in further theoretical developments as well as service provision. In the context of increasing migration and diversification of many societies, it is particularly important to understand the first-hand experiences of those who are its involuntary actors – refugees. This study has made a small addition to such an understanding, in the hope of giving greater voice to the under-researched and overlooked experience of SLTRs in the United Kingdom.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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