

The transition experience of asylum-seekers in Greece: a qualitative study informed by the social identity model of identity change

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate the influence of social identity change processes on the transition experience and adjustment of 16 male Sub-Saharan African asylum-seekers in Greece using the Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC).

Design/methodology/approach – Sixteen individual, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted online. Thematic analysis was carried out to identify, organise and interpret patterns of meaning in the dataset.

Findings – The results indicated that maintaining a sense of social identity continuity as asylum-seekers navigated life change, enabled them to access important psychosocial resources for their successful transition. Similar benefits were documented where participants could derive resources from emergent post-migratory identities and enrich their social self. However, significant identity change challenges also emerged with negative effects on their adjustment and well-being.

Originality/value – Being the first qualitative exploration of SIMIC in the asylum-seeking population, this study provides a richer understanding of the social identity change processes that affect their transition.

Keywords Asylum-seekers, Social identity change, Social identity approach to health, Life change, SIMIC, Post-migratory adjustment

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

In 2023, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that 38.4 million refugees and asylum-seekers worldwide were under its mandate [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2023]. These numbers are forecasted to grow further as armed conflict, human rights violations, violence and persecution persist around the globe (Danish Refugee Council, 2023). At the same time, refugees and asylum-seekers struggle to adjust to host countries, suffering from disproportionately high rates of mental disorders, physical health problems, loneliness and unemployment compared to the natives and other migrant populations, even for decades after their initial settlement (e.g. Blackmore *et al.*, 2020; Löbel *et al.*, 2022; Lundborg, 2013; Reed and Barbosa, 2017).

Against this backdrop, understanding the factors influencing refugees and asylum-seekers' adjustment trajectories following their settlement in host countries is more important than ever. To understand these adjustment trajectories, it is crucial to first distinguish between refugees and asylum-seekers. Legally speaking, refugees are individuals granted international protection

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after fleeing their home country due to persecution, while asylum-seekers are those who have applied for refugee status and are awaiting a decision on their eligibility (UNHCR, 2019). Although asylum-seekers and refugees are often treated as a homogeneous group in research studies (Bradby *et al.*, 2015), their experiences and the factors related to their adjustment may differ widely (Dolezal *et al.*, 2021; Giacco, 2020). Studying the migration experience of asylum-seekers, in particular, is important because early adjustment-related difficulties in the host country following their transition may have severe consequences for their long-term health, well-being and socioeconomic participation (Beiser and Hou, 2001; O'Donnell *et al.*, 2020).

To this end, drawing from the social identity approach to health (Jetten *et al.*, 2017) and the social identity model of identity change (SIMIC; Haslam *et al.*, 2021), this study conceptualises the asylum-seeking period as a major life transition during which social identity change processes may restrain or facilitate post-migratory adjustment of asylum-seekers.

Social identity approach to health: social identities as a cure and curse

The social identity approach to health asserts that social group memberships influence health and well-being by being internalised into one's sense of self as social identities (for a review, see Jetten *et al.*, 2017). Insofar as individuals can derive a sense of connection, meaning, social support and agency from their social group memberships, their health, well-being and resilience against adversity are supported (e.g. Greenaway *et al.*, 2015; Haslam *et al.*, 2018; Iyer *et al.*, 2009; Relke *et al.*, 2022). In this case, social groups and associated identities are said to function as social cures. Nevertheless, when social group memberships do not provide these resources of social identification, social identities may constitute a social curse undermining health and adaptive functioning (Wakefield *et al.*, 2019); for example, when group memberships are socially stigmatised (Sønderlund *et al.*, 2017) or when in-group members are perceived as unsupportive (Kellezi *et al.*, 2019).

Post-migratory adjustment of asylum-seekers as a process of social identity change

Forced migration is undeniably a major life transition that implicates significant changes in the social identity landscape of asylum-seekers. Social identities (and access to the psychological resources they provide) tied to their family, community affiliations, cultural or religious groups and professional status in their home country are often lost because of displacement. Simultaneously, new identities may emerge in the host country by becoming part of migrant communities and integrating into local cultural, social or political groups.

These tremendous changes in their social worlds mean that a social identity change framework may provide insights into the potential social cure or curse processes that affect their post-migratory experience. Grounded in the social identity approach to health, SIMIC theoretically captures the social identity change processes that shape health and well-being during life transitions with evidence confirming its applicability to a range of contexts such as giving birth, post-retirement adjustment, addiction recovery, migrating as an international student and adjusting to psychological trauma and brain injury (for a review, see Haslam *et al.*, 2021).

According to the model, adjustment to major life changes depends on the old social group memberships individuals preserve (social identity continuity pathway) and the new group memberships they develop (social identity gain pathway) after their transition. This is, the social identity changes brought by both pathways can support or obstruct asylum-seekers in adjusting to their life transition. Of particular relevance to the potential role of the continuity pathway for asylum-seekers' transition, Smeekes *et al.* (2017) demonstrated how Syrian refugees with multiple social group memberships before migrating from Syria reported fewer depressive symptoms because they managed to maintain some of their pre-migratory groups, but also how multiple group belonging before migration directly

contributed to increased depressive symptomatology probably due to the effects of losing valued groups (i.e. social identity discontinuity). Concerning the gain pathway, [Kellezi et al. \(2019\)](#) showed that among migrants in detention, sharing a new identity as 'detainees' was a source of support and meaning, but also a source of unworthiness, helplessness, and social isolation due to stigma and loss of agency.

The added value of a social identity perspective in extending acculturation models

It is worth mentioning that acculturation models could also account for asylum-seekers' adjustment trajectories, positing acculturation strategies as the main drivers of their adjustment outcomes ([Berry, 2001](#)). Integration (orientation to both heritage and host cultures) is generally associated with more favourable adjustment outcomes, while marginalisation (rejection of both cultures) is considered the least adaptive strategy ([Nguyen and Benet-Martínez, 2013](#)). However, the typological approach of acculturation models often leads to a rather static categorisation of acculturating individuals (e.g. as absolute integrationists), disregarding the dynamic nature of acculturation ([Bornstein, 2017](#)). In addition, acculturation models describe how specific concepts empirically interrelate, but do not seek to explain the causes of these relationships ([Grigoryev and Berry, 2022](#)). [Ward \(2024\)](#) argues that, for the field to move forward, acculturation research should 'reframe its questions to examine "how and when" acculturation, particularly integration, is related to adaptation' (p. 10) instead of simply asking whether acculturation is associated with adaptation.

The added value of adopting a social identity perspective is that it can accommodate a more dynamic and contextualised approach since social groups psychologically emerge within individuals as a function of the context and the perceiver ([Tajfel and Turner, 1979](#); [Turner et al., 1987](#)). For example, asylum-seekers may fleetingly shift acculturation strategies based on the social identities (e.g. ethnic, host cultural and family identities) evoked under specific conditions. Furthermore, the social identity approach to health designates when and how social groups influence asylum-seekers' adjustment. Groups will benefit asylum-seekers insofar as they psychologically identify with and can derive a positive sense of social identity from them. SIMIC extends this line of thought by describing the specific social identity pathways through which they can draw the necessary group-based resources to adjust to their life transition. Hence, on a practical level, it offers specific social processes as intervention targets to bring about the social cure effects and achieve better overall outcomes for asylum-seekers.

The present study

Despite the growing literature demonstrating the capacity of social identities to affect health and well-being in times of stress and change ([Haslam et al., 2021](#); [Jetten et al., 2017](#)), to the best of our knowledge, only one study has directly examined the transition experience of asylum-seekers through the theoretical lens of SIMIC. In their longitudinal study, [Panagiotopoulos and Pavlopoulos \(2024\)](#) found that higher levels of social identity continuity and gain were related to increased life satisfaction, sociocultural adjustment and physical health functioning and to decreased psychological distress. However, their quantitative design did not shed much light on exactly how the two pathways operated as social cures (e.g. which social identities asylum-seekers maintained or developed and which psychological resources the two pathways gave access to). In addition, their study did not examine the two pathways' potential to function as social cures.

Thus, this study aims to fill these lacunas by adopting a qualitative approach with asylum-seekers in Greece. Considering the dearth of evidence, qualitative methods may provide a richer and more nuanced understanding of the cure and curse effects of social identity change processes during their transition, in ways that could inform effective social identity

management for their successful adjustment. Specifically, we sought to answer what social identity change challenges do asylum-seekers face in transitioning to Greece (*RQ1*) and how group-based processes of continuity and gain buffer against these challenges (*RQ2*).

Method

Participants

Sixteen adult, male, Sub-Saharan [1] asylum-seekers were recruited through convenience sampling [2] (see Table 1 for summary demographics [3]). They were unemployed and living on their own in the greater Athens region through monthly cash assistance offered by UNHCR. They were fluently speaking English and/or French as their first or second language. Participation was voluntary without any compensation. For pragmatic reasons, the sample size had been determined in advance. Following the general guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2013, p. 48), 16 participants were deemed sufficient, considering that our sample was very homogeneous, our aim was rather narrow and we planned to follow a more deductive approach.

Interview protocol development

The interviews were semi-structured based on an interview protocol that contained open-ended questions and prompts following the major topics of SIMIC (see Supplemental Table 1). To develop the protocol, the research team drafted a combination of self-developed and adapted questions from relevant qualitative studies, refining them until consensus was reached. The two interviewers, involved in data collection, conducted mock interviews with each other, making minor adjustments to wording. The finalised version was translated into French by the first author – a fluent French speaker who worked directly with French-speaking Sub-Saharan refugees in the field – and reviewed by a bilingual translator. Before data collection, the two interviewers rehearsed the protocol, calibrating tone, pacing of question-and-prompt delivery and neutral probing. This preparation preserved conversational flexibility while reducing leading questions and inconsistencies across interviews, thus mitigating interviewer bias. A debriefing session held after the first four participant interviews confirmed that no further changes were necessary.

Table 1 Summary demographics of participants

<i>Demographic variable</i>	<i>Summary</i>
Age	$M = 27.4$ ($SD = 5.4$, range: 18–35)
Country of origin	Democratic Republic of the Congo ($n = 5$) Guinea ($n = 3$) Nigeria ($n = 3$) Cameroon ($n = 2$) Gambia ($n = 1$) Ghana ($n = 1$) Sudan ($n = 1$)
Native language	Other than English or French ($n = 12$) French ($n = 2$) English ($n = 2$)
Time in Greece (months)	6–24 ($n = 11$) 24–60 ($n = 5$)
Education level	> 12 years ($n = 7$) 9–12 years ($n = 4$) 6–9 years ($n = 4$) < 6 years ($n = 1$)
Source(s): Authors' own work	

Procedure

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. Participants were approached at a humanitarian organisation in Athens and were invited to participate in the study. An online appointment was booked with those expressing interest in taking part. Before conducting the interview, participants were briefed about the study's purpose and the recording procedures. Participants provided oral informed consent, and recordings were structured to separate consent from interview content. Participants were explicitly informed of their right to skip any discomforting question and to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequence. They were also provided with the researcher's contact details for any follow-up questions or concerns.

Interviews were conducted online on a one-on-one basis – either in French ($n = 10$) by the first author or in English ($n = 6$) by a research-lab member – according to participant preference. On average, interviews lasted about 25 min. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, including hesitations, pauses, long pauses, guggles and strong emphasis (for clarity, these details were omitted from the selected quotes in the results). French interviews were transcribed and then translated into English by the first author. To improve linguistic validity, semantically ambiguous extracts, phrases or words were clarified ad hoc with a bilingual cultural mediator who worked daily with French-speaking Sub-Saharan refugees.

Reflexivity

We engaged in ongoing reflexivity throughout the study to critically examine how our positionality and associated power imbalances may have shaped the research process. We continually reflected on our position as white, majority-out-group members with no lived experience of forced displacement or racial marginalisation while studying refugee populations. We acknowledge that this positionality may have influenced participants' responses and our interpretations, introducing potential biases and unexamined assumptions (Kostet and Verschraegen, 2024). For example, it may have engendered mistrust, reducing participants' willingness to elaborate on sensitive experiences. To mitigate these risks, we foregrounded transparency and reflexive openness rather than a claim to objectivity (Berger, 2015).

We further recognise that interviewers' gender identity and expression may have influenced interactions with the participants and their disclosure in many ways. One interviewer identified as male, which may have facilitated rapport through shared gender identity. The other interviewer embodied characteristics typically associated with femininity and likely perceived as a woman by participants – a dynamic that could reinforce gendered power relations or prompt socially desirable responses. Finally, speaking a common language with the participants (French or English) likely enhanced their comfort in expressing themselves.

Data management

To ensure participant confidentiality, all data were anonymised and/or pseudonymised. Audio files of informed consent and identity keys were stored in an encrypted password-protected cloud folder. A separate folder hosted all pseudonymised datasets (e.g. interview recordings, transcripts). Interview recordings were deleted after transcription, identity keys after analysis and only consent forms and anonymised transcripts remained in encrypted, password-protected storage.

Analytical strategy

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interviews, following a six-phase process (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Phase 1 involved data familiarisation and note-taking. In Phase 2, codes

were assigned to the data until all data items were assigned a code and all segments related to each code were collated. Coding was guided by SIMIC and approached both at the semantic and the latent level of meaning. In Phase 3, codes were clustered into sub-themes based on their common meaning patterns. Subsequently, sub-themes were integrated into broader themes that reflected the central narratives and overarching patterns within the data. For example, codes related to how participants maintained a connection with their ethnocultural identity in Greece, which served as a source of psychosocial support, such as through speaking their native language or forming strong ties with co-ethnics, were grouped under the sub-theme 'Preserving sociocultural continuity in Greece' which was then integrated into the overarching theme 'Maintaining pre-migratory identities as a psychological ground to stand'. All codes, sub-themes and themes were assessed for their relevance, potential overlap and depth concerning the research questions. In Phase 4, candidate themes were inspected and revised against the collated data extracts and the complete dataset. Finally, Phases 5 and 6 were carried out recursively; themes were defined, labelled and connected in a coherent whole, the extracts to be presented and interpreted were chosen and the final report was produced.

The first two authors independently completed each analytic phase to mitigate individual bias and ensure credibility and consistency. Consensus meetings punctuated every phase, and progression to each subsequent phase occurred only after reaching agreement on the preceding one. Earlier phases were revisited (e.g. coding reviewed multiple times) whenever later insights required it, making the process iterative. Although an inductive and deductive approach was combined in data analysis, the latter was prioritised, considering that SIMIC drove the overall orientation.

Finally, the extracts presented in the results included ellipsis within square brackets ([. . .]) to represent omitted text and words within square brackets to provide clarifications that were not part of the original quotes. Commas indicate intonation continuity and quotation marks indicate others' sayings. Personal identifiers (e.g. country of origin, time in Greece, dialects) were replaced by general information descriptions to ensure confidentiality.

Results

Transitioning to Greece as an asylum-seeker was an inherently stressful experience, not least because it entailed social identity change challenges for all participants. Theme 1 describes these challenges and how they undermined participants' adjustment by being a source of distress, devaluation, exclusion, loneliness and helplessness (*RQ1*). However, in many cases, participants were able to draw upon group-based resources that buffered against these challenges and were seen to positively contribute to their transition process. In this regard, Theme 2 demonstrates how participants maintained some of their pre-migratory identities along their transition and the way these preserved identities led to a more positive experience (*RQ2*). Theme 3 illustrates how emergent post-migratory identities contributed to participants' positive appraisal of their transition and afforded them psychological resources to cope (*RQ2*). A summary of the results can be found in Supplemental Table 2.

Theme 1: Social identity change challenges

Unintended discontinuity. A major social identity change challenge attached to participants' experience was the forced interruption of their former relationships and social life, which created feelings of distress and loneliness: 'It was abrupt, difficult to, to suddenly lose the family, the studies, the friends, my life, and so suddenly you're alone with nobody' (P4, age 26).

Added to this was a feeling of constant uncertainty about important others in their home county; whether they would be able to re-establish ties with them and their whereabouts:

'My wife with my two children, they are hidden, they are even in another province. Now until now, I have lost contact with her' (P8, age 35). This intensified their distress about (lost) old groups, created feelings of nostalgia and induced worry and rumination: 'I'm even with thoughts about those people that we knew each other, thoughts about how there's no contact anymore, how we can communicate again' (P9, age 24).

Incompatible and unsupportive old groups. In some cases, certain groups back home were appraised negatively, with participants voluntarily cutting ties and contact. Many felt that old groups were incompatible with their new emergent identities in Greece and that this incompatibility was an obstacle to their adjustment:

Since I arrived here in Greece, I don't have any contact with those in my country [...] we don't have common goals, we don't have common objectives, so it's really limited to "hello, hello, how are you, it's going well, it's going well" and it ends there [...] I'm really, really focused here. (P10, age 18)

Lack of a shared understanding and experience meant that social support from groups in their home country was perceived as inadequate: 'From the home country, I don't think that I can have more [support] because they don't know how is it being here' (P11, age 27).

In other cases, loss of social support from old groups back home was associated with the development of an in-group division (i.e. those still suffering back home vs those earning well in Europe):

Well, I didn't keep in touch, I didn't want them to have my number because at the beginning when they had my old number, they only called me for the material, to ask me to 'send us from there'. According to them they believe that here I have organised my life, I have money because in our country when you leave the country for Europe, it's like that you earn well. (P2, age 29)

Devalued group memberships and sense of injustice in Greece. Fundamental to most asylum-seekers' lived experience of their transition to Greece was a sense of injustice, which was shaped by their treatment in Greece as members of a low-status minority group with limited rights. On the structural level, asylum-seekers had limited access to resources and were deprived of their basic human needs, rendering the whole asylum system illegitimate. This was evident during their first instalment, where the inhumane living conditions at the camp were described as a 'moral torture' (P2, age 29).

The daunting asylum procedures and multiple rejections of their asylum applications meant that they often found themselves undocumented or with a temporary status, despite being in Greece for several years and returning to their home country was not an option. By extension, this meant social exclusion without access to basic resources such as work and health services:

At the end of the day, you are an asylum-seeker, you are only an asylum-seeker, there are things you can't do, you can't do, they want people to adapt to life here, but by closing the doors to us. How can we adapt if they close the doors to certain openings [...] like having a job, like maybe having an AFM [tax identification number] or having AMKA [social security number] or a lot of things like that. (P6, age 31)

As illustrated in the extract above, their distress was fuelled by the perceived illegitimacy of their devalued group status (i.e. legally unrecognised refugees without rights and access to resources). The distress and disadvantaged status were even more accentuated by the perceived illegitimacy of asylum officers' indifferent decisions and treatment of their asylum applications:

We are the ones who have lived the reality and when we come to explain the situation to them [the asylum office caseworkers] sometimes, they don't see the obvious and we don't earn what we deserve, so many, many, many find themselves with a rejection, yet they can't go back home. (P3, age 35)

For most participants, group-based devaluation and rejection were also experienced on the basis of their ethnic minority membership, notably due to ethnicity, language and physical appearance (i.e. black Africans):

Even in the bus, when I'm sitting there are empty seats next to me, I ask 'Miss do you want to sit?' 'No, no, no, no, no, no' and when I get into the subway, I find a lady sitting there, I try to sit down and they put books or they move, as if I'm a monkey. (P8, age 35)

Feeling unjustifiably devalued and rejected based on their asylum-seeker or ethnic group membership, also cultivated mistrust and suspiciousness towards the host society, which in turn further exacerbated social exclusion and isolation. At the extreme end of this mistrust and suspiciousness, some participants mentioned how they were living in a state of constant fear of racist attacks:

Really my life is to run away, just going out and coming in and being suspicious of people, looking for the places to go, the places not to go [...] I can't mix with people who are racists, no. I always live separate you know. (P1, age 21)

Failing to derive resources from devalued post-migratory group memberships (or moving away from them). In the face of perceived illegitimate group devaluation and social exclusion, many participants could not perceive any alternative to restore a positive identity. As demonstrated in the previous sub-theme, a strategy of individual mobility in the host society was deemed to fail, considering that as asylum-seekers they had limited rights, while as ethnic minorities they were carrying an unconcealable ethnic group membership. Under these circumstances of group impermeability, participants would have to rely on other asylum-seekers and/or ethnic group members in Greece to respond to identity threat and devaluation. Yet, instead of strongly identifying with in-group members, many participants felt psychologically detached from them. This seemed to be incited by the constant movement of other asylum-seekers and co-ethnics, and the transient nature of the asylum-seeker identity that jeopardised group relations:

No permanent friend, because before you know it everybody will leave. So, there is no way you can socialise to be permanent. Until you get your residence or asylum approval, you know that, yes, I am now one to stay, let me make friends for future. (P14, age 26)

For others, psychological detachment from their in-group was driven by the perceived illegitimacy of their imposed categorisation as legally unrecognised refugees and their self-categorisation as 'entitled' refugees who should be given documents:

I am many years in Greece, and then I will need for us to get our documents, you know for us who have been here for that long [...] I believe it would to be very okay and easy for everybody if you know those who deserve to be given papers are given. (P15, age 35)

Many participants also described the perceived lack of social support from other asylum-seekers and co-ethnics:

Here if we say close it's a big word because all these people here, they take care of their problems, maybe we meet together 'Ah my brother are you ok? Yes, I'm fine and you? I'm fine, yes'. It's over, we live like that here because everyone has their own problems, that's it. It's normal because you have to solve your problems here, the work, the asylum card, the mental problems [...] I'm all alone in Greece. (P7, age 31)

By extension, the lack of in-group support and entitativity left no room for participants to derive a sense of collective agency, perpetuating a feeling that they exerted no control over their life and environment through their social or personal self: 'You don't have any papers, you don't know what to do [...] there's no way to go back, there's no way to go forward, we're stable here' (P2, age 29).

Theme 2: Maintaining pre-migratory identities as a psychological ground to stand

Keeping in touch with people back home. Participants established a connection between their past and present by staying in contact with their family or groups they belonged to before transitioning, and by learning about their home country. This acted as a source of self-efficacy and emotional support in today's challenges, and instilled meaning in their lives in Greece:

My family helps me morally to overcome the challenges [...] it gives me some, some strength to know that I have them with me, in my head not physically, like, like fighting alongside them. (P3, age 35)

I needed to be in touch [...] they know me, my life, I want them to know the rest of my life, otherwise you feel cut in half [...] I can say it gives a meaning to my efforts here, yes, so it makes me feeling good. I can also say that I need to know what's going on in their life and in my country, I grew up there. (P4, age 26)

Preserving sociocultural continuity in Greece. On the grounds of a common ethnocultural identity, many participants formed strong relationships and lived with people of similar ethnocultural backgrounds in Greece – most often co-ethnics. Not only these ethnocultural in-groups instilled feelings of belonging, provided much-needed support and restored perceived control, but also generated a sense of continued selfhood through speaking their native language, learning about their home country and enacting their home country's cultural customs in Greece. This sense of sociocultural continuity strengthened a differentiated sense of self within their new environment and gave purpose and meaning to their lives in Greece:

When I'm with them [co-ethnics in Greece], it's for the interest of learning a little more about the country, our country, and also to help me speak my language again [...] so that gives me courage [...] it makes me see that I am not really alone. (P4, age 26)

We have an [ethnic] group here that allows us to support ourselves, to share whether it is financial, whether it is moral [...] so, when I'm in this context I really feel at ease, I feel like I'm in the village [...] we speak in the dialect, in our ethnic dialect, speaking this dialect allows us to differentiate ourselves, it allows us to find ourselves, it allows us to live our culture in some way. (P5, age 27)

Theme 3: Developing and deriving resources from new identities

Asylum-seeker identity as a source of connection, support and agency. Participants highlighted that other African and co-ethnic asylum-seekers shared similar background stories and faced common adjustment-related difficulties in Greece. It was this sense of shared experience and common fate that led many to transcend ethnicity and develop a sense of shared asylum-seeker identity, through which they felt connected, provided support to each other and derived a sense of self-efficacy and hope to cope with post-migratory stressors:

We are all asylum-seekers from Africa, so really, they have the same problems with me. We discuss sometimes about our problems and that's good because we understand each other a little bit and sometimes we share information for the procedures, the organisations. (P10, age 18)

Everyone [other African asylum-seekers] talks about their experiences, we give each other advice, we give each other, we help each other to deal with what we are going through [...] each one represents the other's dad and the other's mom here. (P3, age 35)

Connecting and identifying with the host society facilitates adjustment. Fleeing to Greece to avoid conflict and persecution afforded many asylum-seekers a sense of security, freedom and social equity. This was in turn associated with feelings of homeliness and belonging to

Greece that contributed to a positive appraisal of their transition: 'I felt protected [...] I was welcomed, I was housed, I was fed [...] I have the right to do as the Greeks, I can say I am half Greek, I have a paper that allows me to move freely' (P5, age 27).

These feelings of homeliness and belonging to Greece were further reinforced by the formation of relations with Greeks. Connecting with Greeks enhanced host national identification that provided a sense of hope, support and self-efficacy to socioculturally and psychologically adjust little by little to their new environment:

They [Greek co-workers] encourage me to make an effort here, they give hope [...] they give me invitations too 'come here, we're here somewhere, we're here in Athens come' it helps to adapt little by little, I learn the language and the Greek way, the culture you know, I'm African but with Greek manners now too. (P9, age 24)

Positive growth. Participants also described how they viewed their life change as an opportunity for personal development and growth. Despite many challenges, where the social self could be enriched and re-defined this facilitated the transition process:

I can learn a new language, a new culture, English and Greek at the same time [...] I met new people, I'm working in a very different environment from the one I was living in my country [...] I can say it's good for me because I'm taking care of myself here today. So, it's already a very good, very good step for me. (P3, age 35)

Discussion

This qualitative research, informed by the social identity approach to health, investigated how the social identity change processes outlined in SIMIC shape asylum-seekers' transition experience and adjustment in Greece. Consistent with the model, preserving a sense of continued selfhood (Theme 2) and positively utilising new post-migratory identities (Theme 3) were found to facilitate their adjustment through the group-based resources of social identification. Yet, both pathways also contributed to asylum-seekers' vulnerability, imposing constraints to their adjustment and well-being (Theme 1). In the following sections, we discuss in more detail each theme and sub-theme through the lens of the social identity approach to health and SIMIC.

Social identity change challenges

For most asylum-seekers, the transition to Greece was accompanied by feelings of distress, loneliness, social exclusion and helplessness. These negative experiences were tied to the social identity change processes of discontinuity, incompatibility and (enforced) gain of disadvantaged group memberships in the host society. Although discontinuity is inherent in all life changes (Haslam *et al.*, 2021), the threat to multiple parts of their social self simultaneously ('It was abrupt, difficult to, to suddenly lose the family, the studies, the friends, my life' [P4, age 26]) rendered asylum-seekers much more vulnerable to feelings of loss (Smeekes *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, discontinuity was not merely a source of nostalgia as in other migrant populations (Jetten *et al.*, 2018), but also a source of worry and fear about permanently losing important others, in ways that perpetuated their distress.

Yet, in certain cases, participants deliberately distanced themselves from social networks in their home country due to perceiving their old and emergent group memberships as incompatible. Socio-environmental stressors in Greece (e.g. language difficulties) may create a sense of internal disharmony between the two, in ways that forced asylum-seekers to choose whether to orient themselves towards pre- or post-migratory groups (Benet-Martínez and Haritatos, 2005), with the latter option probably being more beneficial for their sociocultural adjustment and well-being in Greece (Panagiotopoulos *et al.*, 2022). This possibility is corroborated by the fact that some participants perceived their pre-migratory groups as unsupportive on the basis of a weak sense of common understanding and fate.

Considering the detrimental effects this may have (Wakefield *et al.*, 2019), for some asylum-seekers cutting ties with certain pre-migratory groups may have been more adaptive than keeping in touch with them.

In addition to the transition challenges related to the continuity pathway, asylum-seekers' transition process also entailed identity challenges vis-à-vis their post-migratory group memberships. According to SIMIC, if continuity is a practically inviable route (Haslam *et al.*, 2018; as in unintended discontinuity sub-theme) or harmful instead of beneficial for one's life change (Dingle *et al.*, 2015; as in incompatible and unsupportive old groups sub-theme), establishing new group bonds and identities counteracts the adverse impact of this loss. However, for asylum-seekers who felt rejected and devalued based on both their forced and unjust 'legally unrecognised refugee' membership and the highly visible ethnic minority group membership, the cure effects of the gain pathway turned into a curse (Kellezi *et al.*, 2019; Sönderlund *et al.*, 2017). Apart from the potential negative consequences on health (Schmitt *et al.*, 2014), perceived group-based rejection created barriers to host society participation and identification (Jasinskaja-Lahti *et al.*, 2009; Kellezi *et al.*, 2021) hindering their adjustment process (Bobowik *et al.*, 2017).

Ultimately, at the heart of the social curse effect was not solely the perception of unjust group-based treatment, but the inability to effectively cope with this identity threat. Group-based rejection in a context of group impermeability (i.e. host society participation) and perceived illegitimacy should have encouraged in-group identification in an effort to restore a positive identity (Jetten *et al.*, 2011). Nevertheless, what was evident in some participants' accounts was a sense of detachment and lack of social support from other asylum-seekers and co-ethnics, as people were constantly moving and the asylum-seeker identity was seen as temporary. Here, discontinuity was a constant threat that obstructed the emergence of a sense of common fate, an essential condition for feeling connected with and supported by their in-group (Alfadhli *et al.*, 2019; Drury *et al.*, 2016). In addition, instead of being a social cure for restoring the lack of personal control over their life transition (Relke *et al.*, 2022), the non-agentive asylum-seeker identity reinforced feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

Maintaining pre-migratory identities as a psychological ground to stand

Counterbalancing the challenges that pre- and post-migratory identities imposed on the transition process, Theme 2 demonstrated how asylum-seekers preserved some pre-migratory identities, which in turn acted as social cures through both the social identity continuity and gain pathways. Consistent with previous findings (Smeekes *et al.*, 2017), staying connected with significant others back home was a source of emotional support and offered a sense of meaning and self-efficacy in participants' transition to Greece, acting as a bridge between their past and present. Importantly, it was the subjective sense of belonging to meaningful pre-migratory groups ('I have them with me, in my head not physically' [P3, age 35]) experienced from this contact that seemed to benefit asylum-seekers rather than contact itself (see Sani *et al.*, 2012).

In addition, evident in participants' accounts were subjective perceptions of belonging, positive in-group distinctiveness, control, support and meaning, where existing identities could be revived post-migration through the social identity gain pathway. This was mainly accomplished through joining groups of similar ethnocultural backgrounds (i.e. ethnic group identification). Notably, given that these new social connections were highly compatible with participants' pre-migratory social self, they were more likely to positively affect their well-being and ability to re-orientate after the transition (Iyer *et al.*, 2009). The above is consistent with evidence demonstrating how ethnic group identification protects refugees' well-being and health (Bobowik *et al.*, 2017; Çelebi *et al.*, 2017), and also points towards the role of perceived ethnocultural continuity in bringing about the social cure (Sani *et al.*, 2008).

Developing and deriving resources from new identities

To the extent that participants identified with other Africans and co-ethnics as asylum-seekers, their asylum-seeker group membership – even if devalued – was a source of resilience. Critical for the formation of an asylum-seeker identity was a sense of sharing a common fate (Alfadhli *et al.*, 2019; Drury *et al.*, 2016), supported by the exposure to the same contextual stressors that occurred from being African asylum-seekers in Greece (e.g. lacking documentation, family separation, colour discrimination). In turn, their shared identity as African asylum-seekers served as a platform for forming mutually supportive and trusting relationships (Alfadhli *et al.*, 2019) and was associated with feelings of self-efficacy and hope to navigate through their transition, in line with the potential of groups to enhance feelings of agency and control (Greenaway *et al.*, 2015).

Equally important though was the emergence of a sense of belonging to the host culture, facilitated by regaining their lost sense of safety, freedom and social equity (see Hauck *et al.*, 2014) and by newly formed relationships with Greeks. On the one hand, this served as a personal gateway from a devalued minority to a higher status group membership (i.e. host national identity), a process that protects migrants' well-being (Bobowik *et al.*, 2017) by giving rise to a sense of positive distinctiveness (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). On the other hand, host national identification and the potential for upward social mobility may have also acted as a scaffold for future identity construction. In ways suggested by Bentley *et al.* (2019), host national participation provided a sense of hope and self-efficacy to become (e.g. construe a work-related future identity). Along these lines, evident in some participants' narratives was a higher sense of well-being and satisfaction with their transition, where they had the opportunity to develop new skills and knowledge to adapt (e.g. language acquisition, interpersonal competence in the new environment). This growth process did not solely entail an understanding of who they thought they were (e.g. African asylum-seekers trying to adapt in Greece), but was probably 'a very good step' (P3, age 35) for gaining a perspective for who they thought they could become (e.g. active members of the host society).

Limitations and future perspectives

First, our sample was relatively small and exclusively consisted of black Sub-Saharan men independently living in Athens. Had we included a more representative sample of the asylum-seeker population in Greece, we may have captured additional themes. Similarly, the experiences of asylum-seekers in Greece may differ from those who seek protection in other countries. Yet, considering that our analysis was mainly theory-driven, future research should examine whether the latent social identity change processes may be broadly applicable across samples and contexts (although they may manifest differently). Second, the cross-sectional design and the fact that most participants had been in Greece between six months and two years limit our understanding of how these identity processes unravel throughout their transition, a topic that should be further investigated. Importantly, time spent as a refugee in a host country seems to have a great influence on social identification (e.g. Alfadhli *et al.*, 2019). Third, being interviewed online in their non-native language and having limited formal education introduced multiple interrelated obstacles in the interview process: increased fatigue and difficulty elaborating on very abstract or complex topics; interviewers' adherence to simple, literal phrasing to ensure comprehension that led to fewer opportunities for in-depth elaboration of responses; the lack of in-person nonverbal cues that inhibited effective probing and diminished engagement; and home-environment interruptions and connectivity issues that in certain cases constrained uninterrupted dialogue. Further, being interviewed by majority-out-group members may have engendered mistrust that reduced participants' willingness to elaborate and fully articulate their experiences. Together, these factors may have contributed to relatively brief interview sessions (i.e. 25 min on average), limiting the richness and depth of participants' responses.

Finally, although the present results suggest that social identity change processes engendered social cure and curse effects during the transition of asylum-seekers, future research should more thoroughly study how these effects dynamically influence one another.

Conclusions

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to offer a qualitative account of asylum-seekers' transition experience through the lens of the social identity approach to health and SIMIC. The results demonstrated that asylum-seekers' post-migratory adjustment (or maladjustment) is shaped by the social identity continuity and gain pathways and that the social identity changes generated by both pathways can be both beneficial and detrimental. Future studies should concentrate on how the social cure and curse change processes dynamically interact throughout asylum-seekers' life change in different contexts, using more representative samples. Ultimately, this would pave the way for developing suitable interventions and policies that support a successful transition.

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Data availability

The participants of this study did not give consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was granted from the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (protocol number 241/27-01-2022).

Consent statement

Oral informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Notes

- [1.] The term 'Sub-Saharan' denotes the geographic region encompassing participants' countries of origin, which share some broad sociocultural threads such as (1) a collectivistic orientation and (2) ongoing poverty, sociopolitical instability and intergroup tensions, largely rooted in colonial legacies (Naudé, 2022). We acknowledge the substantial heterogeneity between and within Sub-Saharan countries regarding nationality, ethnicity, culture, religion and language (Naudé, 2022). However, a detailed analysis of this heterogeneity and its nuanced implications for participants' experiences lies beyond the scope of the current study.
- [2.] The sample consisted exclusively of male Sub-Saharan Africans due to a lack of access to participants with other sociodemographic characteristics.
- [3.] Individual demographics are not reported to protect participant confidentiality from deductive disclosure.

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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