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## SPECIAL ARTICLE

## LIFE IN A GREEK REFUGEE CAMP: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT ON BEING A NURSE VOLUNTEER

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**Abstract**

**Introduction:** In 2016, a rising migration wave swept the Mediterranean area with numerous overcrowded makeshift transport boats crossing the Aegean Sea, with most arriving in Greece and thus, certain European countries started to close their borders. As a result, many refugees became trapped in northern Greece, unable to continue via the Balkan route to countries further north. With rising criticisms on camp operations, the lived experiences of volunteers working in the camps are essentially needed as a deep informative basis for further analysis and actions to be taken.

**Aim:** The purpose of this reflective position paper is to elaborate on the testimony of a nurse volunteer who has been working with immigrants and holds extensive personal experience in living and interacting in refugee host camps and related structures in Greece.

**Methods:** This case study is based on a personal narration of what a volunteer reported during the deployment of a face-to-face unscripted interview and in a reflection of her lived experience. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach was employed, aiming to understand deeply moving individual experiences by examining how the volunteer interprets and makes sense of those experiences within their unique contexts.

**Analysis:** In an analysis of the original interview content, the following critical reflective points were deployed as key elements of the subject's narration within the context of the study as follows: Information dispersion; Recognition of support; Extreme behavior; Religious fanaticism; Perceived racial or cultural prejudice; Aftermath and Risk awareness.

**Conclusions:** Key elements of the workers' experiences in refugee camps can be a very constructive basis for everyone involved, therefore informing employees, future volunteers and the wider public.

**Keywords:** Anxiety disorders, risk factors, etiology, biopsychology, developmental psychology.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2016, a rising migration wave shook the Mediterranean region with numerous overcrowded makeshift transport boats crossing the Aegean Sea with the majority of them landing on Greek soil.<sup>1</sup>

As a result, specific European countries made the decision to close their borders, thus leaving a big number of refugees stranded in northern Greece, unable to continue their journey via the Balkan route to other European countries.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, Europe was evidently unprepared for this humanitarian crisis due to the disproportionate number of the arriving refugees and its health care system weak points, therefore, many volunteers and NGOs stepped in to provide assistance.<sup>3</sup> With harsh criticisms on camp operations the lived experiences of volunteers working in the camps are deeply essential in building a constructive basis for further analysis and actions to be taken.<sup>4</sup> Reflective accounts are now a well established component for reflective practice and also a key to the premise of learning from experience.<sup>5</sup> There is a wealth of international literature to support that promoting reflective writing, increases critical thinking and analytical abilities.<sup>6</sup> It also builds upon cognitive development, enhances creativity and provides further unique connections to be made between disparate sets of information. Thus this process contributes to new perspectives being taken on issues which have not been explored thoroughly previously.

Many authors argue that despite reflective writing being increasingly visible within qualitative research, still there is an evident need for it to be further acknowledged as a key element in the methodological processes within research studies and recognized as an essential part of their elaboration (Franco et al., 2022; Tremblay et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2021).<sup>7,8,9</sup> As a result, this paper supports that reflective writing and its use within qualitative research is an 'eye-opener' method in its own right which provides valuable data and essential insights within the analytical processes (Corby et al., 2015).<sup>10</sup>

## AIM

The purpose of this reflective position paper is to elaborate on the testimony of a nurse volunteer who has been working with immigrants and holds extensive personal experience in living and interacting in refugee host camps and related structures in

Greece.

## METHODS

### Study design

This case study is based on a personal narration of what a volunteer reported during a personal testimony about her own experience. In this sense, reflection is seen as the ability of critical examination and usage of previous experience to influence further constructive actions.<sup>11</sup>

This paper employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, aiming to comprehend very moving individual experiences by examining how the volunteer interprets and copes with those experiences.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, instead of traditional phenomenology, IPA was chosen as the enquiry method for this paper's needs in order to acknowledge the role of the researcher's interpretations while aiming to remain as close as possible to the interviewee's perspectives *per se*.<sup>13</sup> Thus, this study employed IPA in an effort to explore the volunteer's lived experiences of working in a refugee camp with real-life incidents.<sup>14</sup> This was deemed crucial in understanding the essence of the phenomenon of nursing volunteering perspectives in local hosting initiatives. The operational processes of the control explication method are delineated in further detail in the analysis section.

### Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the camp's directory board which acts as an Ethics Review Committee too. Written consent was obtained from the volunteer after a full explanation on the study's purpose and procedures involved was given. Reassurance was also provided that any personal information obtained would be kept confidential and that she had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Following the subject's permission, the interview was digitally recorded for verbatim transfer and subsequent analysis. The face-to face interview lasted for 45 minutes and took part in a neutral and safe environment outside the camp's premises.

### Personal narration from the volunteer's testimony of the

### **work in the 'Lagadikia' refugee camp: a representative extract**

"In 2017, and for a one year period, I was in the refugee accommodation structure in 'Lagadikia', near the city of Thessaloniki in Northern Greece. My work there fell under the brackets' of being an NGO 'Danish Refugee Council' (DRC) employee. I was assigned on a five days a week workload (weekdays and/or week-ends) on a two-hour basis, having also declared my desire to dedicate myself in further voluntary actions too.

All members of the NGOs involved in the camp (with the exception of the interpreters and lawyers of each organization) shared some core basic common tasks on daily basis such as:

- a) Helping with the preparation of food (within the NGOs 'kitchen' facilities).
- b) Fair distribution of food (next to the preparation site).
- c) Delivery of some food items in parcels (to those further afield).

As part of our voluntary action regime, we also organized some social activities such as knitting, yoga, gymnastics, etc. Also, due to my nursing experience, I had to deal with certain medical emergencies, until the necessary services were mobilized.

There were many more support groups in the camp, such as Doctors Without Borders, but interaction and cooperation between us was never formally addressed. Roles and facilities were completely distinct. The camp housed refugees who had just arrived in Greece or had already been accommodated in other temporary structures. They were mostly of Syrian or Pakistani origin. To be precise, Syrian families and a few male Pakistanis were always accommodated in separate facilities (initially tents and then small houses). In most cases the Syrian families knew exactly the time and place of their next move to other European countries while Pakistanis seemed to be less well informed.

We communicated easily with almost everyone in English, while when a language issue arose, the DRC interpreters were notified. Most of the refugees were friendly and cooperative with us. Some Syrian families in particular displayed notable gratitude and appreciation, by kindly inviting us on a number of occasions, to their 'home' in order to treat us with a simple cup of tea or even offer to share a meal they had prepared for us!

However, there were also several incidents of hostility towards

us. Many of the camp residents tended to be under the impression that they could directly dictate our plan of care, with us having to fully obey to any of their demands such as a no physical contact rule. Characteristically, many looked at us defiantly, intensely and directly in the eyes, which as I subsequently found out was considered very offensive in their own culture, as well as often using a rather stern tone of voice and mannerisms with the intention of making us wary of them.

An incident that particularly upset me was during a normal encounter that a Syrian refugee tried to forcibly remove a rosary with a cross that I was wearing on my wrist. Thankfully, there was an immediate intervention by my colleagues, making it clear by their firm action that I wasn't allowed to be touched. However, no real threat or violent attack was ever made against us, in the camp premises.

Yet there were often 'revolts' in the camp, which more than often seemed to start from the Pakistani natives, but immediately would spread to the sub-site of the more populous Syrians. During the episodes of unrest, the guests threw mattresses from the accommodation sites, set fire to some of the facilities and on occasion there would even be stabbing incidents.

In these cases, DRC would react immediately by evacuating the site via use of their vans in order to get the staff away safely, since at the time there was no safety personnel for guarding and ensuring order. Nevertheless, personally, I never felt threatened or in danger during these incidents. Fortunately, DRC had organized training sessions and group gatherings in English for psychological support for its members, although personally I never felt like they had any particular psychological benefits to me.

Clearly the majority of Syrians, who were there mostly with their families, had earned a special place in my heart. Our relations had been wonderful pretty much from the beginning and as a result it was a mutual need for both sides to keep in touch even after their relocation, making our parting with them and even more so with their children, deeply moving.

In conclusion, I have come to believe that all the challenging incidents I experienced were aftereffects of religious fanaticism and its resulting vengeful mood. Still, with great enthusiasm I would offer again my services as a nurse volunteer to such a cause. This whole journey has gifted me with multiple beneficial

lessons and has broadened my horizons while shedding light on the prejudices that these vulnerable groups are subjected too."

## DISCUSSION

In analysis of the original account above, critical reflective points will be deployed as key elements of the subject's narration within Phenomenological research and the insights this provides to the researcher and the reader per se in order to understand and describe the universal essence of this phenomenon, i.e. refugee camp volunteer work.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, analysis serves as an approach that investigates the everyday experiences of those working in these circumstances while suspending the researchers' preconceived assumptions about the phenomenon. In other words, this case study explores lived refugee camp involvement to gain deeper insights into how volunteers understand those experiences.<sup>16</sup>

**Information dispersion:** as indicated, Syrians seemed better informed than other ethnic groups, namely Pakistanis. Yet, it is not clear if the lack of knowledge is due to lower language skills, less information given, or poorer dissemination within the group itself. Clearly, this indicates that more efforts need to be made in order to ensure fair and effective dispersion of relevant information to all those in need in the camp.

**Recognition of support:** as mentioned, some Syrian families displayed noticeable gratitude and appreciation, offering humble hospitality to the hosts, i.e. hosting the host seems to be a highly appreciated cultural element which seems to serve equally both cultures involved. Thus, offering to share even the most basic food is a mean of showing deep appreciation.

**Extreme behavior:** the interviewee was concerned about certain hostility and condescending behavior towards volunteers. Yet, the attitude of 'you work for me!' by some camp residents is very common amongst the host culture already, i.e. Greeks often employ similar attitudes when encountering public services in routine life, but they might find it twice as offensive if such an attitude is employed by a foreigner.

**Religious fanaticism:** on a particular incident, the interviewee was 'attacked' for the rosary with a cross she was wearing. Thanks to the intervention of the other camp members no real harm was done. Yet, this incident highlights the importance of

ensuring religious tolerance from both workers and refugees constructing a multicultural and diverse religious common area. However, as it was previously stated, there was no real threat or violent attack made against the volunteer or any other worker in the camp premises during the entire working period.

**Perceived racial or cultural prejudice:** on a not so positive note though, the paper shows that there are risks of racial elements infiltrating overall judgments of different groups. As testified, 'revolts' in the camp seemed to start often from a specific ethnic group. Yet, instead of focusing on the ethnicity of the group, perhaps we should primarily focus on the specific circumstances, for instance lack of information, perceived unfairness in resource management and ultimately hope for a change in these circumstances.

**Aftermath:** In conclusion, on one hand there may have been a more-than-positive view on specific refugee groups who made the interviewee desiring to keep a close relationship with them even after their departure for Europe and be a part of their new lives, on the other hand there were others who were continuously distant. Although one could argue that working as part of the hosting team in camps involves deeper human exchanges, on the other hand professionalism deters closeness as it may cloud judgment. Therefore, clear adherence to a set of standards, code of conduct or collection of qualities that characterize accepted practice within the camp should be agreed upon and made clear to all.

**Risk awareness:** Although the interviewee stated that she never felt threatened or in danger during certain incidents in the camp, many reports point out that aid workers fear for their safety due to camp overcrowding that grows more severe by the day. Thus, risk awareness should not only be focusing on the wellbeing of the refugees within the often volatile camp life environments but also about the volunteers' safety and working conditions too.

Overall this paper used phenomenological research data to expose how people can often react to emotionally and physically demanding line of duty situations, in order to make sense of their experience. By interpreting the participant's personal accounts, feelings, perceptions and beliefs the researcher attempted to clarify the overall essence of the phenomenon under study, namely being a volunteer worker in an overpopulated

Greek refugee camp.<sup>17,18</sup>

### Limitations

As a rule of thumb, a case study approach as the one deployed for this paper has the inherent risk of distorting facts and conveying bias which may influence the research per se. thus, the authors tried to put emphasis on setting aside their own personal opinions and preferences whilst interviewing the subject of interest. Yet, this study remains to be a subjective narration so no absolute guarantees for total objectivity can be given.

Moreover, as this was a single person case study there is considerable difficulty in generalizing findings to other similar settings, especially when the readership is accustomed to clear-cut statistical answers.

Hence, although the relative lack of objective scientific rigor provides no basis for extending findings to broader populations, it still offers useful insights into the personal world of lived experience of nurse volunteers.

### CONCLUSIONS

From this personal testimony, perhaps the most important conclusion we can draw is that there is a possibility for upgrading refugees' camp living conditions, with updated information equally and seemingly provided to all. Although development of interpersonal relationships between workers and refugees is unavoidable caution should be exercised in ensuring safety and professionalism. Key elements of the experiences of the workers in refugee camps can be a very constructive basis for everyone involved, therefore informing employees, future volunteers and the wider public.

Thus, the use of phenomenological research as demonstrated in this case study, may help explore the views of those who have experienced it and by investigating lived experiences we can all gain a deeper understanding of how human beings think and react about a phenomenon, i.e. in this case the global experience of actually being a part of camp life.

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