Research Article

EXPLORING THE PSYCHOSOCIAL EXPERIENCES OF AFGHAN REFUGEES IN ITALY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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The Taliban restored their government in Afghanistan in August 2021, following an international agreement and a rapid offensive throughout the country. Consequently, many Afghans who collaborated with the United States-NATO coalition were forced to leave the country. Forced migration events expose people to a wide breadth of sudden stressful changes, conventionally assumed as trauma. This article proposes another point of view of forced migration considering the turning points to understand negative impact and resilience trajectories, exploring the life stories of 34 Afghan refugees who were evacuated from Afghanistan to Italy. Grounded theory and a thematic analysis method were used to infer themes. The results show three themes: the shock for the taking of Kabul, a tragic possibility, gaining a sense of mastery. The last theme, gaining a sense of mastery, displays a form of suffering but also various forms of resilience and new modes of engagement. Overall, our results foreground the deep role played by the social and historical bonds in forging both suffering and resilience in the identified turning points. From these insights, practical implications for community-based psychosocial interventions can be drawn.

Keywords: *forced migration, Afghanistan, community violence, PTDS, collective trauma, turning point*

1. Introduction

In recent years, Afghanistan has experienced a severe economic crisis which has been exacerbated by economic sanctions imposed by the West, and the country is facing one of the world's most challenging humanitarian crises. According to the August 2022 report of the World Food Programme (WFP), Afghanistan has the highest prevalence of insufficient food consumption globally, affecting an estimated 18.9 million people who are food insecure (WFP, 2022). This situation has resulted in mass displacement within the country, and into neighbouring countries. According to the most recent UNHCR report, Afghanistan is third in the world, after Venezuela and Syria, with people displaced across borders (2,712,900). In 2021, it was the country with the highest number of new asylum applications submitted (125,600) (UNHCR, 2022).

On January 22, 2019, during the presidency of Donald Trump, a negotiation for the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces began between the Taliban representatives and the Alliance. A fundamental political sign was the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan,

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known as the Doha Agreement, signed between Taliban representatives and a US delegation (Coll & Entous, 2021). The Special Representative for Reconciliation of Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, proposed four fundamental points, which included the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan; the promise to prevent terrorist groups from threatening the US; the opening of a power-sharing negotiation between the Islamic Republic and the Taliban; and, finally, an immediate ceasefire of territorial hostilities (Coll & Entous, 2021). In the following months, the Taliban representatives declared that the ceasefire would be conditional on the departure of the Americans and that the fight against the government of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's government would continue. Taliban spokesperson Staniksai made additional demands, including the release of militiamen held in Afghan prisons. President Ghani was excluded from the negotiations and his disappointment was not considered at all. On 29 February 2020, Khalilzad and Abdul Ghani Baradar, the deputy prime minister of the Islamic Emirate at that time, signed the final text of the Doha Agreement. However, effective intra-Afghan peace negotiations never took place (Maley & Jamal, 2022).

After 20 years of US and NATO presence in Afghanistan, in April 2021 US President Joe Biden announced the definitive withdrawal of American troops by September 2021. After the US forces' withdrawal in April of 2021, the Taliban rapidly took control of major provincial capitals with little resistance from the Afghan army. On 15 August 2021, Afghan President Ghani left the country, and the Taliban fighters seized control of the capital and the government (The Guardian, 2021). The promptness of the Taliban action and the scarce resistance from the Afghan military forces of the ruling government surprised all international embassies.

From August 15 to the deadline set for August 30 during the Doha Agreement by the parties involved, international embassies organised rescue flights to evacuate collaborators from the country. During those days, thousands of citizens flooded the streets of Kabul, trying to reach the Hamid Karzai International Airport to escape persecution and reprisals. Many of them never left due to chaos in the city, such as the blocking of rail transportation or the cancellation of international flights. For example, on August 26 a suicide bomber blew himself up among a crowd of people trying to make their way to the International Airport. The attack was then claimed by ISIL-K (Atkins, 2021).

The Italian government, via the coordination of the Ministry of Defence, launched Operation Aquila Omnia, whose aim was to evacuate Afghan citizens, along with their family members, who had provided consistent linguistic, logistic, and organizational support to the Italian contingent during its mission in Afghanistan. These individuals would be at risk of persecution by the newly established Taliban-led government. Simultaneously, the Ministry of Defence, in collaboration with the Ministry of the Interior, took proactive measures to grant them International Protection. Initially, military and civilian personnel were safely transported from Afghanistan to Kuwait. Subsequently, a strategic and long-range transport aircraft completed the airlift from Kuwait to Italy. A total of 87 flights were carried out in 15 days. Aquila Omnia started on the 13th of August and ended on the 27th of August and successfully evacuated 4,890 Afghan citizens to safety, including 1,301 women and 1,453 children (Ministry of Defence, 2021).

After the end of evacuation operations from Kabul, the Council of the European Union, in its Declaration on the Situation in Afghanistan of 31 August 2021, advocated for the need to offer aid to Afghanistan's neighbouring states to address the impact of displacements in the region. At the same time, Europe continued to promote a security approach to migration management to strengthen its borders and counter potential illegal and uncontrolled

migratory movements (Council of the European Union, 2021). Published in October 2021, an Amnesty International report denounced continuous pushbacks of Afghan asylum seekers from Iran, Pakistan and Turkey, and in Europe at the Bulgarian, Croatian and Polish borders. All countries were urged to open new safe and regular pathways for Afghan citizens wishing to seek protection (Amnesty International, 2021).

Nevertheless, the academic world launched several solidarity initiatives in response to numerous violations of the right to study and academic freedom denounced in recent months (SAR, 2021). In particular, the University of Padua, with the *Unipd 4 Afghanistan* programme, financed 50 scholarships to support Afghan students who had found themselves in danger or lost the possibility of accessing studies following the deterioration of the country's political situation (Unipd, 2021). The scholarship was reserved for Afghan students who were in Afghanistan at the moment of the fall of Kabul (or were abroad, unable to come back home for security reasons). Indeed, Unipd political choice was grounded in the broader positive Italian sentiment towards Afghani migrants fleeing from Kabul (e.g., Moise et al., 2023). The Taliban takeover was highly mediatized in dramatic ways, perhaps contributing to the constitution of a climate of acceptance, as the participants' quotes will confirm, despite the fact that Italian attitudes toward refugees are critical (e.g., Nese, 2022).

The present study adopts a qualitative psychosocial perspective (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2022) to explore the experiences of Afghan refugees fleeing the country and reaching Italy through emergency evacuation rescue flights organised by the Italian government through the Aquila Omnia operation. Many of them are students enrolled in the *Unipd 4 Afghanistan* scholarship.

2. Turning points among forced Afghan migrants

The experience of being forced migrants, as in the case of Afghan refugees, can be profoundly stressful and disruptive (e.g., Carroll et al., 2023). Usually, forced migration is the result of a series of traumatic events to which people have no alternative, and the decision to migrate is generally taken under very strong pressure by circumstances. Individuals are forced to leave their land against their will, due to political or religious fear, without preparation, in a hurry to avoid threats and to save their lives. They cannot choose a destination country, they have no time to mourn their losses, they will not be able to return to their country of origin. These traumatic events add an additional layer of complexity to the forced migration experience for these people and have been found to be a predictor of mental illness, posing one of the biggest challenges for psychologists and mental health practitioners in the social fabric of the host society. Therefore, psychological research on migration has widely studied the negative mental health outcomes of such an experience, focusing on the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) condition and symptomatology (Schiess-Jokanovic et al., 2022). Together with depression and anxiety, PTSD is one of the most common psychiatric diagnoses among refugees in high-income countries (Carroll et al., 2023; Martin & Sashidharan, 2023; Henkelmann et al., 2020). A systematic review and meta-analysis by Blackmore and colleagues (2020) of studies conducted across 15 countries, reported a prevalence of 31.46% for PTSD in refugees and asylum seekers. A rate of 31% for PTSD was found in a meta-analysis of 4873 forced migrants from Syria (Nguyen et al., 2022). Furthermore, from a meta-analysis of the relevant literature (2010-2020), Carroll and colleagues (2023) found that the rate of PTSD was higher among forcibly displaced people versus labour migrants. Almost half of the

66 Afghan refugees (48.8%) resettled in Australia met an operational definition of probable PTSD, and family separation was one of the factors most strongly associated with the diagnosis (Hamrah et al., 2021). However, the focus on PTSD and other psychiatric/clinical psychological conditions is gradually fading in psychologically and psycho-socially oriented migration studies.

Thus, more social, context-sensitive and multilinear studies are emerging, considering sociodemographic and also pre- and post-migration factors that predict mental health problems (Im & Swan, 2022; Schlaudt et al., 2020) to inform targeted interventions (Pluck, Ettema & Vermetten , 2022; Slobodin & De Jong, 2015). Recently, more emphasis has been placed on post-migration conditions and difficulties, which, in addition to pre-migration trauma, have been proven to affect mental health (e.g., Bottura & Mancini, 2016; Hynie, 2018). Thus, beyond a linear model establishing a direct cause for a clinical outcome, scholars are discovering the intersections between different dimensions and the interplay between several timeframes in the migratory experience. In this vein, the recognised importance of post-migration factors (e.g., Bottura & Mancini, 2016; Gleeson et al., 2020; Haase et al., 2019) encourages the establishment of multi-modal interventions that address the therapeutic and psychosocial needs grounded in the broader reality of refugee's lives (Hynie, 2018). Several studies stress the healing potential of community-based and social capital-based programmes to address the need for the connection of forcibly displaced people (Bennouna et al., 2019; Villalonga-Olives et al., 2022; Wachter et al., 2021). Still, in their review of psychosocial research in the field of forced migration in Italy, Tessitore and Margherita (2017) pointed out a scarcity of community-based and psychosocial research compared to the clinical and mental health trajectory, based on a psychiatric-oriented paradigm aimed at identifying possible psychopathological outcomes and risk factors.

Therefore, with the present research we intend to position ourselves in those emerging lines of research broadening the field of psychological and social psychological events beyond the clinical dimension (e.g., Andersson & Øverlien, 2023). This is particularly relevant in the humanitarian field, where individual experiences are deeply intertwined with historical and political contexts (Becker, 1995; Summerfield, 1999). Indeed, in cases of human rights violations and collective and political traumas (as in the case of the following research), a clinical view risks placing an excessive burden of responsibility on the individual's adaptation, ignoring the moral and political implications that are inherently involved and neglecting the community and global relevance of these traumas (Hamburger et al., 2018; Zamperini & Menegatto, 2018). As Benasayag (2015) stressed, the medicalisation of human suffering implicates a shift from suffering as a tragedy, and thus something which can have a meaning, to suffering as just something which is grave, and thus without meaning. Although the latter is always related to a single individual, the former results from the existence of many interpersonal and ecological connections between the person and their natural and cultural environment, as well as from the ability to be affected and engaged by events that may not necessarily be physically close to them.

Central and fundamental to the building of this alternative analytical framework are theoretical and empirical studies that draw inspiration from the sociology of events (e.g., Wagner-Pacifici, 2017) and the life-course domain (e.g., Abbott, 2001; Elder et al., 2003; Wingens et al., 2001). From this perspective, the experience of traumatic events in forced migration can be thought of as a series of turning points.

The concept of turning point is derived from the sociological approach of life-course studies and aims to investigate the complex interplay between individual biographies and

social forces, as well as to describe the change in the intersection between historical and lifetime events (Elder, 1994; McAdams & Olson, 2010; Wingens et al., 2011). This framework allows psychology and social psychology researchers to move beyond the individual dimension and meet the subjective migratory experience as multi-composed in nonlinear and overlapping ways (e.g., Andersson et al., 2021). Thus, events have always a liminal nature (Stenner, 2017), meaning that they are both outside and inside the person and that, indeed, meaning-making and affective processes always emerge at the border, at the meeting and crossing point (Marsico, 2016). As Ford and Lerner (1995) argued in the domain of psychology, the life course is not made up of preset phases/stages and preestablished accomplishments the individuals should reach. Although important quantitative transitions between states might be, psychology should focus on the qualitative discontinuity in human development and thereby highlight the expression of novelty throughout meaningful events. Thus, turning points represent transitions to a qualitatively different organisation, implying multiple evolutionary dynamics and accounting for the diverse ways in which a person may resist and react to a biographical and historical event (Abbott, 2001; Ford & Lerner, 1995). According to the life-course paradigm, turning points open up a period of transition, i.e. a psychological reorientation through which people respond to a sudden and disruptive change (Afaf I. Meleis, 2010), a process of accommodation between subject and context (Bronfenbrenner, 1981), which has also been conceptualised as a liminal phase of "ontological indeterminacy" between previous dissolving normality and a future, vague, and indeterminate horizon (Greco & Stenner, 2017, p. 152). In this condition, the subject may feel vulnerable and disoriented, but, at the same time, involved in the various challenges to rebuild their life, through mutual accommodation with the new environment, negotiating alternative forms of being in the world (Bronfenbrenner, 1981; Ford & Lerner, 1992). In this way, new biographical trajectories – understood as future-oriented motivational and action patterns – start to take shape (Bronfenbrenner, 1981).

Furthermore, turning points in history and in life are not to be understood as instantaneous and isolated moments, but as processes. This processual nature overlaps with the notion of an event and its theoretical grounds. As Wagner-Pacifici (2017) stated, events have a paradoxical quality:

> [They] *appear to come out of the blue, but must be made out to have a history*. In other words, they must be both without a history (groundless, unexpected) and connected to history –the making of events is all about the attempt to simultaneously assert and overcome their novelty, their apparent history-less nature (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017, p. 68).

Wagner-Pacifici calls political semiosis the set of discursive and practical representations through which the flow of events is substantiated in cultural and symbolic forms, the novelty of what happened is domesticated and incorporated into the known world and meanings are grafted onto the confusion and shock generated by a biographical and historical rupture. Thus, 'event singularity is inevitably compromised by the analogizing, evaluating and genealogizing political semiotic work' (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017, p. 69). These dynamics are like the trauma drama process, as is presented in the social theory of cultural trauma, that is, the 'spiral of signification' that separates an event from its collective representation (Alexander, 2012; Hamburger, 2020). Therefore, turning points are intrinsically narrative events (Abbott, 2001; McAdams et al., 2001). As such, they are highly affective life-events where the semantic

subjective perspective is solicited in a narrative meaning-making constructive process (e.g., De Vincenzo et al., 2022; McAdams, Josselson & Lieblich 2001).

Despite a common focus on temporality, research on migration that adopts a life-course perspective is rather limited (Wingens et al., 2011). However, some good exceptions that directly or indirectly refer to this tradition can be identified (Valencia, 2017). For example, Ajrouch and collaborators (2020) took a developmental frame integrating ecological models and the life-course approach to study the experience of forced displacement as a multi-level phenomenon entailing multiple disruptions in the social ecology of an individual. In a similar vein, Khan (2021) investigated how the life trajectories of young migrants were shaped by the intersection of multiple crises (the Civil War in Nepal, the 2015 earthquake, and the COVID-19 pandemic). Andersson and colleagues (2021) used the turning points analytical framework to understand the challenges faced by unaccompanied refugee children after resettlement. Using Zittoun's socio-cultural model (2012), Womersley (2020) explored the role of imagination in giving meaning and overcoming the disruptive experience of forced migration and torture. Through a collection of life stories, Cornejo (2008) gave a nuanced account of how Chilean exiles in Belgium dealt with the discontinuity introduced in their lives by the turning point of the 1973 political coup and the impact it had on their identities.

3. Present research

The present research aims to address the issue related to forced migration among a group of Afghan refugees who were forced to suddenly leave their country due to the Taliban takeover and migrated to Italy. Specifically, we examined psychosocial factors, such as stressors, emotional distress, social support and resilience strategies, as well as the impact of migration on life trajectories. In doing so, we explored the traumatic events that are common in migration experience as a series of turning points in the life of refugees from a qualitative psychosocial perspective (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2022).

The two foci of this study are as follows:

a) How has the sudden and unexpected escape from Afghanistan affected the life trajectory of Afghan citizens who arrived in Italy?

b) How has the individual experience taken shape within the broader collective, political and historical traumatic event of the Taliban takeover?

Therefore, the unit of analysis is the person-in-context: 'an organisation of variables that influence each other' according to circular functions, namely 'a causal field' (Ford & Lerner, 1992, p. 80). In this respect, in-depth knowledge of the context of analysis becomes essential for a good psychosocial account of the subjective experiences (Gergen, 1973).

3.1 Methodological design

The investigation was conducted in two phases. A first phase took place in September 2021 immediately after the first Afghan refugees arrived in Padova. This study included a collection of information on the historical and geopolitical context by reviewing critical essays, grey literature, and conducting six exploratory interviews with experts in the fields of international migration and Afghan culture, history, and society. Through this preliminary phase, we defined the research questions and developed a comprehensive understanding of the situation to outline the historical–political horizon of the crisis in Afghanistan and its relations

with international powers. Once the informative phase was complete, a second phase took place in November 2021. In this period, we developed a semi-structured narrative interview protocol based on the literature review and feedback from experts in the field. We preferred semi-structured narrative interviews because they are more suitable for capturing the individual's story as a narrative, connecting with the self-in-relation through intentional dialogue with other people who live with the forced migration and experience the traumatic events as a result. In this vein, turning points in the narrative story indicate changes in the journey of migration through the trauma of collective violence. Finally, we detailed the data analysis methods and procedures as well as participant recruitment and involvement.

In our study we adopted a twofold recruitment strategy. On the one hand, we contacted key actors in the Italian reception and integration system who helped us make initial contact with some of the research participants. We then used a snowball sampling technique through which we recruited 21 of our respondents. The remaining 13 participants were students who received a scholarship within the *Unipd 4 Afghanistan* project of the University of Padua and were invited to participate in the research via an email from the Unipd International Relations office. Afghanis receiving the *Unipd 4 Afghanistan* scholarship (see above for granting criteria) had the same background as other participants and thus we adopted the same semi-structured interview protocol. Inclusion criteria for the study were: a) to be Afghan refugees arriving in Italy after the Taliban takeover in August 2021, b) to be 18 years of age or older, c) that the Veneto region was their final destination.

3.2 Methods of data collection

Thirty-four Afghan refugees (n = 15 female and n = 19 male) responded to our request and were admitted according to the study criteria. The interviews were conducted by a female social psychologist (G.F.) with the help of a trained female cultural mediator and the supervision of two social psychologist researchers (A.Z. and C.D.V.). All interviews took place between December 2021 and April 2022. They were between 60 and 90 min long. Twenty-eight interviews were conducted in-person and 6 via video calls. Of these interviews, 7 were conducted in English, while the 27 were conducted with the assistance of a certified interpreter and translator of the Dari language. The interview guides were available in both languages and translated and backtranslated to ensure accuracy. Before the interview, all participants signed an informed consent form that provided essential and relevant information about the research. The consent form also specified that participants could refer to the social psychologists supervising the research for further support if needed and that they could, at any moment, deny the consent. Finally, the privacy of the participants was guaranteed through anonymisation and safe data storage procedures.

After completing the qualitative analysis of all interviews, we also planned to organise several 90-minute focus group discussions involving the same participants. The purpose was to encourage a collective reflection about their experiences and to discuss the findings with them. Of the total of 34 participants, 5 agreed to participate, resulting in the arrangement of one focus group. The focus group proved to be particularly valuable in refining, co-constructing, and revising themes and sub-themes in a more participatory manner. The focus group took place in May 2022 and was conducted by a female social psychologist with the assistance of a female cultural mediator and the supervision of two social psychologists researcher.

The study followed the American Psychological Association Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

3.3 Methods of data analysis

All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in English language (the Dari interviews were translated and transcribed in English). Importantly, qualitative findings were discussed with the assistance of a certified interpreter and translator. Our purpose was to ensure that the intended meanings and linguistic-cultural nuances of the participants had been considered as meticulously as possible. Then, we performed a qualitative analysis of the textual data adopting a thematic analytical approach (Braun & Clark, 2006) and following an abductive and iterative logic of analysis (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). We chose thematic analysis since its analytical frame allows the researcher to look for themes and categories without necessarily having a predefined theoretical unit to search for. Thus, thematic analysis, as a method, provides a clear theory on the process of data analysis, without pre-suggesting a theory or an interpretative frame on data. To us, using thematic analysis was the best tool to deepen our goals and confront and compare them with the preexisting literature and life-course theorizing. Along a similar line, the decision to adopt an abductive and iterative logic of analysis means that we constantly moved between raw data (i.e., the words used by participants) and emerging categories, trying to ensure that the process of interpretation was solid and grounded. The abductive logic of analysis requires the researcher to bring core concepts in mind (top-down), while still maintaining an open attitude towards the vivid words of participants (bottom-up) (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010). Therefore, we first familiarised ourselves with the data by reading them three times and taking notes of recurrences, similarities, differences and insights. Then, two analysts independently coded the interviews and, at the end of the phase, matched the results to guarantee consistency and accuracy. Following the initial coding phase, we started grouping codes into thematic categories, according to our research interests and questions. In this phase, analysts followed an iterative process of repeated comparisons, noting analogies or relationships between the extracted data and going back and forth between original transcriptions and themes to check for consistency. Finally, the categories were grouped into three themes, which provided an abstract/theoretical conceptualisation of the richness of the empirical data.

Finally, the bilingual interpreter and translator perform a fundamental mediating role as co-interviewer and co-researcher, seeking to understand and communicate the life-worlds of interviewees with their historical and social characteristics, culturally embedded gestures and attitudes (Qun & Carey, 2023; Suurmond, Woudstra & Essink-Bot, 2016). Dual language work involves a creative process of meaning generation from participants' words to the research manuscript, which ensures cultural sensitivity and overcomes monocular Western-grounded perspectives (Qun & Carey, 2023).

4. Findings

4.1 Participants

We recruited 34 Afghan refugees, 19 male and 15 female. They ranged in age from 18 to 36 (Mean = 26.68; SD = 4.90). The ethnic groups were represented as follows: 19 Hazaras, 9

Pashtuns, 5 Tajiks, and 1 Sadat. Twenty-eight participants resided in Kabul (82,35%); 15 belonged to the Hazara ethnic group (44,12%); 19 had received higher-level education (55,8%), followed by 11 who received a degree (32,35%). Before forced migration, 18 participants were directly involved in the defence or human rights field: 7 worked for NATO-supported organisations (20,59%) and 11 were actively involved in human rights interventions (32,35%). Sixteen were indirectly linked through the participation of some relatives in defence institutions or human rights associations (32,35%) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of the study participants (n = 34)

Gender	Male	19
	Female	15
Age	Mean	26.68
	Range	18-36
	SD	4.90
Ethnic group	Hazara	15
	Pashtun	9
	Tajiks	5
	Sadat	1
City of residence	Kabul	28
	Bamiyan	2
	Herat	2
	Ghazni	1
	Kandahar	1
Education level	Doctoral degree	2
	Degree	19
	Higher education	11
	Middle education	2
Occupation (before departure)	Undergraduate student	11
	Company employee	5
	Manager	4
	Lawyer	3
	Teacher	3
	Singer / artist	2
	University professor	2
	Dentist	1
	Driver	1
	Journalist	1
	Psychologist	1
Directly involved in defence or human rights field	Human rights organization	11
	NATO	7
Indirectly involved in defence or human rights field	Human rights organization	9
	NATO	7

All participants reached Italy between August 2021 and March 2022 via rescue flights organised by the Italian Ministry of Defence between August 13th and 27th from Kabul Airport, or through Pakistan or Iran route receiving entry visas to Italy, or via the Balkan route.

4.2 Themes and sub-themes

All findings were organised to reflect three major inductive and deductive interrelated themes emerging from the analysis of the interviews and refined through the focus group discussion: the shock for the taking of Kabul, a tragic possibility, gaining a sense of mastery. Four sub-themes were associated with the emerging themes (see Table 2).

Table 2. Turning points and related themes and sub-themes that emerged

Turning point and theme	Sub-theme
The shock for the taking of Kabul	Loss of safety
A tragic possibility	
Gaining a sense of mastery	Reconnection with the past Becoming agents of change Emotional ambivalence

4.1 First turning point: The shock for the taking of Kabul

This theme emerged when interviewed participants described the moment of the taking of Kabul on 15 August 2021. It was the first turning point that introduced a discontinuity in Afghan history and in the biographical trajectories of participants. All respondents reported an immediate reaction of shock and devastation. They described a sense of disbelief and astonishment: 'I was sick; I was disoriented, and I had the feeling of a blind person occupying a dark room' (BH). The entry of the Taliban into Kabul foreshowed a sudden and radical transformation, the crumbling of a world, their world, with its own order and meaning: 'That day was totally like the last day of the world!' (MS). The participants immediately found themselves on the threshold of unanticipated profound and dramatic structural changes: 'that day I was between the old and the new government and I saw many unexpected things' (MS). They reported experiencing disbelief and misunderstanding of what was happening around them with astonishing speed: 'it was a nightmare because everything was unimaginable [...] we woke up, we lived a normal life and then there was no longer the Afghan state and government' (YK).

Loss of safety. This sub-theme describes the rupture of the event as also impacting the future orientation of life trajectories. The respondents reported radical insecurity and disorientation that arose suddenly when they saw their own future and the future of their country losing the shape that was possible to anticipate and imagine, albeit with uncertainty, i.e. the realisation of personal projects and the socio-cultural development of Afghanistan: 'During the first two weeks, I did not even know where I was . . . I am disoriented. I want to go to a corner and cry for everything that happened to us' (BH).

The arrival of the Taliban in the capital was a strange and disturbing episode that suddenly broke into everyday life: on the streets, at work, in universities. The participants felt overwhelmed by the course of events and the necessity to flee:

> I do not know how all of these things happened; I still do not believe it. When the Taliban arrived, I was at the university. One of our mates came and told us, 'Go, Taliban are in Kabul!' Everyone was escaping; it was not important where, just go! A lot of people wanted to reach a safe place, the night we planned to leave, we didn't sleep at all, we were concerned about the future, about our family, I hope no one experiences that, if you do not experience, you cannot feel it (AB).

4.2 The second turning point: A tragic possibility

Analysing the interviews through the lens of turning points helped us to understand how the passage that led the participants to change their status, from Afghan citizens to forced migrants, was perceived and how it impacted their biographies. All the participants reported that becoming a migrant was experienced in a double way. In this second theme, the participants described the tension they felt between constraint and possibility.

On the one hand, they reported that the migration was forced because no one was going to move abroad before the tragic event of August 2021 as this participant stated: 'In my city, I felt well, I had my family, my friends, I played sports, there were no reasons to plan a departure. It was a normal life, satisfying, full of stimuli and connections with the territory' (RA). But after August, they declared that they had no choice: 'I was achieving personal goals, I had a normal life, but suddenly I was forced to migrate to save my life, fleeing persecution, or certain death' (YK).

On the other hand, for some participants, forced migration represented an opportunity for their future. For example, SQ, who worked at the Italian military base in Herat, said that forced migration 'was lucky, a chance he didn't want to miss'. This dichotomy constraint/possibility caused inner conflict in participants experiencing guilt and regret for leaving family, friends, close relatives and compatriots in mortal danger while protecting themselves and their freedom, as this participant extensively argued:

> It was a truly strange moment, in which I was truly shocked, I left the country like this..., because each of us only thought about saving our lives. […] Then obviously I thought about freedom, also because if I had stayed in Afghanistan I would have always stayed at home, so, I wouldn't have been able to go out, if I wanted to go out, certainly with the veil, everything covered. Then, I also wanted to add the fact that when they [the Taliban] arrived, obviously there was no more work, so you couldn't even work, so of course I had to leave the country. Then the important thing is that we were trying to save our lives because in some way we were doing social activities, especially my brother who was really active, he had also been threatened several times in the school where he taught [...]. But there is also guilt for leaving the country. […] Sometimes I feel really desperate, I lose hope and then when there are quite serious problems, I think that maybe it would have been better to stay there, and get killed by the Taliban. […] Anyway, leaving was a good choice. […] This period will pass… I try to resist and overcome this moment (KK).

A similar disturbing feeling was triggered by the view of their compatriots perishing in front of them during departure, as well reported by this interviewee: 'During the attack, I was forced to pass over people, my compatriots who were dead, I had to pass over their corpses to come in Italy. I have not been able to digest this yet (BJ).

4.3 The third turning point: Gaining a sense of mastery

All the participants reported how arriving in Italy had contributed to an important turning point in their lives, with the acquisition of a sense of mastery over their migratory experience. This theme describes the experience associated with this turning point: feeling safe from violence and danger, getting hospitality, restarting a new life, in a new dimension of freedom. 'Here, there is the possibility of starting over again, starting a new life, studying and learning Italian, being able to do what we want' as reported by NG. For some student participants, the academic scholarship available by the University of Padova represented an important, precious and unexpected opportunity for their professional life as BJ said: 'For me, this scholarship was an excellent opportunity, I lived a great emotion because I had never imagined being able to pursue such an important academic path'. This was a central turning point in the forced migration process that increased a sense of control over their own lives and allowed the participants to navigate ambivalent and disturbing emotional experiences in their daily life through novel forms of connectedness with their past, the host society and the homeland, as specified in the following sub-themes.

Reconnection with the past. This sub-theme describes the process of historicization of the ruptures represented by turning points. The participants diachronically related the political upheaval of August 2021 with other episodes of collective violence from the Afghan past. Specifically, they described the events of August as a repetition of what happened in 1996 with the establishment of the first Islamic emirate, as in the following quote: 'I was 2 years old when in 1996 the Taliban arrived for the first time, then we moved, we immigrated, we were away from our homeland for 15 years then we returned. After twenty years, history is back again' (YB). Moreover, their experiences were synchronously related to the pain of other peoples and communities living in current theatres of abuse around the world, especially the invasion of Ukraine, which recalled the violence and disruption suffered: 'Unfortunately, we also understand perfectly what is happening in Ukraine. So, when there are these wars, many people are killed and human rights are trampled upon. As a result, there is the destruction of families, homes and emigration that we are seeing' (AS).

To convey this perception of being crushed in the middle of the same repetitive economic and geopolitical dynamics, the participants used the 'Great Game' metaphor. Recognising a common root of suffering, this metaphor contributes to inscribing the incomprehensible drama/trauma in a historical and collective – therefore tragic – dimension.

> I think Afghanistan has always been a playground for many politicians. [...] They have practically played with the fate of a people and, well, it is a real desperation, because I worked in that country, and I worked hard. [...] When I read the history, I often see that Afghanistan was always, in a sense, a field of war and sometimes I feel despair, a lack of hope, and I wonder why I was born in this land. At least if I had not been born, I would never have felt everything I am feeling right now (BJ).

This subtheme confirms the power of the past to help individuals connect in the present. In this case, reconnecting with the past events helps the Afghans interviewed better understand their present. This also appears as a cognitive strategy to cope with the chaos and confusion generated by the first turning point.

Becoming agents of change. The dramatic political economic and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan urged and challenged all interviewees to react, generating different courses of action to address this situation through various paths. The political upheaval in August 2021 has highlighted violent historical dynamics that act by destroying communities and uprooting people from their contexts. However, in the participants' words, this image of oppression and displacement was not coupled with the withdrawal of personal commitment but with determination to break this repetition of history:

> This story repeats itself, it repeats itself continuously, but anyway you do not give up. You know that at the end of the story, it will always be like this, but you commit yourself all the same. I personally try to change something, in my own small way (MI).

A specific form of commitment to change was an attempt to counter the general amnesia surrounding the fate of Afghanistan. This target became increasingly urgent with time, especially after the beginning of the war in Ukraine, since the international community moved on from Afghanistan. From the impossibility of forgetting, as a passive condition in which the drama of the Afghan people reached and disrupted the course of their days, almost all participants started to 'remember the present', to contrast the dehistoricization of their situation against the background of ever-changing news and political agenda. Therefore, instead of letting the broader audience forget about Afghanistan, they chose to talk about it, to engage in a seemingly contradictory 'remembrance of the present' that became a choice, an action entailing different forms of denunciation and testimony on social networks, conferences and interviews, as in the following citation:

> As soon as I saw 'Voices from Afghanistan' [the title of the project], I decided and thought I should definitely participate in this interview. I have already done 18 conferences in Italy. [...] At the moment, with this situation, there is less and less talk about Afghanistan, and the Taliban are taking advantage of the situation; thus, the condition of women is increasingly difficult. I am trying to take advantage of the small opportunities to give a voice to the Afghan women and say everything I can – talk about our pain (BJ).

Remote support initiatives aimed at their reference groups family, friends, ethnic community and women were a practice to address the situation in Afghanistan. Many interviewees, for example, were organising online lessons and taking care of the education of family members who, due to the restrictions imposed by the Taliban, cannot attend school. The dramatic conditions of their families in Afghanistan often resulted in an emotional and cognitive burden for all our participants. Attempts at family reunification are often made, usually clashing with the precariousness of the political situation in Afghanistan, restrictive Italian policies on immigration and administrative delays. Often, as for this 18-year-old participant interviewed, this affective bond has become a bond of responsibility, which morally obliges to guarantee economic support for the sustenance of the family and avoid terrible consequences:

> My father and brother [who are in Afghanistan] do not work. I will bring food home. Then my father says 'We are starving, and we will be forced to sell your sisters.' And I said, 'Please do not sell them. I will do anything to send you money to help you.' (MZ).

Others are trying to maintain their long-distance collaboration with the NGOs and civil society associations where they worked before leaving, with the activist groups of which they were leaders. However, as one participant stated, the priority to solve family problems seems to fragment collective agency:

> Here everyone has his own problems and being together is difficult because you are always thinking about family: this thing keeps us apart. I am still in touch with human rights NGOs, we try to raise our voice, we try to be together, but we feel problems, sometimes I cannot concentrate, that thing keeps us apart. What is important to me? The life of my family. Now, every Afghan is worried about earning money to keep on and feed your family. So, we set apart the community to focus on our family. […] Why cannot we be together? Because they [the Taliban] cat our arms, so if you do not have arms, how can you take others' hands? So, give us our arms back and we can take others' hands! This is the main problem for every Afghan. If we had our arms back, we could be together; we could be strong again (YB).

Nevertheless, in many cases, it is still possible to activate transnational networks, encouraging forms of cooperation between members of the diaspora and colleagues who remained at home:

> We are in contact with people in Afghanistan who see the crime scenes up close but cannot reveal them. They tell us and communicate, and we bring these events to the attention of the mass media. We write about these facts. This is already a struggle. Second, we are in constant contact with the girls and try to offer them psychological support. We will not allow Afghanistan to be eliminated or forgotten by the media. We are also in constant contact with important people who have power and an edge in battles of this kind, and we will ask them for help. We try to hold meetings to see what can be done (BH).

A particular form of action to change turned out to be the attempt to reshape an established representation of Afghanistan, depicted as a land of violence and backwardness. Many of the students interviewed, when speaking with Italian colleagues and friends, tried to challenge an established narrative of defeat and resignation, reinforced by the current situation and by the fundamentalist measures imposed by the Taliban regime, and in this way they contributed to build a counter narrative (e.g., Schapendonk, 2021), as the following quote well expresses:

> Now that I am in Italy, with the Italians I speak to, I try to change the image they have of Afghanistan. When you talk to Italians, what image do they have? Poverty, an Afghanistan that has always been in a chaotic situation, never freedom. But I try to talk about the beautiful things we have, that we have had in history, even

> through art galleries, photos, paintings, etc. I am looking for documents with sources... for example, if you go to YouTube, you will find videos from 1970, and there are also videos on President Zahir Shah's meeting with the American president, images of girls going with boys to university and also, perhaps, many advances that were not yet in Europe. So, here, I try to show this, to document, and make people understand the situation that was there. In 20 years, in my opinion, Afghanistan could make the progress of those years. I also tell many times about my friends, artists, people who had created something, and innovated something: these aspects were there! (MB).

Finally, many young professionals and students said that they wanted to use the period away from their homeland as an opportunity for growth, training, and reflection, in order to return to Afghanistan as soon as possible, enriched with experience and useful knowledge to be put at the service of their people. The imagination of this possibility often became the main element orienting their work, study, and present commitment, and was an important source for meaning-making. Sometimes, faced with the impossibility of an imminent realisation, this desire was projected far away and bequeathed to the next generation. The future of Afghanistan is uncertain; personal and collective wounds are not easily healed, but our participants show that new paths can emerge, that there is still the possibility to hope:

> As Iranian poet Sohrab Sepehri says, 'Wherever I am, the sky is mine [No matter where I am, the sky will be mine].' I see a great future for me and my daughters. They will be the ones to rebuild Afghanistan. [...] Humans live with hope (BH).

Emotional ambivalence. With this sub-theme, we refer to the twofold experience the participants went through after their arrival in Italy. On one hand, they arrived in a safe place in which they could foresee many personal possibilities and freedoms: to carry out projects and desires, express themselves freely, and build new professional careers: 'The Italian context apparently allows us to finally realise the dream, shared by generations of Afghans, of leading a 'normal life' in peace and safety' (MB). On the other hand, participants always reported subjective distress and concern for the dramatic condition of their families and communities in Afghanistan, who were under threat or, at least were living in a condition of material precarity and existential turmoil, as the news constantly reports. Some recurring statements in the analysed interviews are: 'I think of Afghanistan 24 hours a day' (YK); 'I am here but it's as if I am there' (KK); 'I am physically in Italy, but my heart, my mind and my thoughts are in Afghanistan' (BJ). Nights of our participants were sometimes disturbed by nightmares of explosions against their compatriots and ethnic group, although they had not experienced them directly. This ambivalence emerges clearly from the following quote:

> Since I arrived in Italy, yes I am quiet, I am in a country that has the right of women and women are respected but still, since I am always worried about the family... If my mother were next to me, obviously I would learn Italian much better; I could integrate into society much better . . . I feel very happy to be here, I intend after learning Italian to be able to study and continue my studies, and create a future, but anyway I think, I think of my country, the homeland, the homeland is in a certain sense equivalent to the mother, I cannot help but think about the mother [...] because I do not think only of myself! [...] I feel sorry for all the thousands of

> girls, women, mothers who suffer, who are committed, struggling but suffering at the same time, so I cannot help but think of these women (SP).

Interestingly, the participant's concern for the mother and all Afghan girls locked in their homes and deprived of their rights expresses a deep sense of connectedness with both family and community, mother and homeland, as if the boundaries between the two were blurred.

This subjective sense of anxiety was often triggered by the latest news about Afghanistan received from the media or personal informants. These stimuli disturbed daily activities and prevented participants from 'making their own life', concentrating on studying, learning Italian and making new friends. Moreover, as in the following quote, the simplest daily activities, the opportunities for recreation and sharing, promptly act as triggers, recalling the scenario of deprivation in Afghanistan:

> When you are sitting in a park enjoying your time with your friends, you think that your sister cannot go to school there, parks are divided into female and male parts, even restaurants… so in the middle of the day, you are cooking, at a concert, in other cities, anything, you try to enjoy but in the middle you cannot… it reminds you of the lack of opportunity in your country (SA).

Once again, the participants could not fully enjoy the privileged condition of calm, security, and freedom, as it often evoked the opposite condition of danger and deprivation experienced by their people and their relatives still in Afghanistan. This possibility of living a 'normal life' came with a tragic nuance because it could not be shared with other relevant people (i.e., family members who are still in Afghanistan). Thus, this ambivalent experience highlights the many bonds and relationships that connect each subjectivity to one's own loved ones, land and people.

5. Discussion

This research provides a detailed and nuanced qualitative portrayal and a processual understanding of the experiences of Afghan refugees who arrived in Italy following the fall of the Afghan government in August 2021. The three themes and related subthemes identified underscore the turning points and the transition experiences provoked by the abrupt change in the Afghan government and the following forced migration of the study participants. Overall, the results are particularly interesting from the point of view of the life-course paradigm, within which the concept of turning point has turned out to be a valuable analytical tool for understanding the psychosocial consequences of forced migration. The first theme showcases how the political upheaval of August 2021 clearly impressed a turning point in the participants' life trajectories, since it entailed a structural transformation at the junction between history and individual biographies (Ford & Lerner, 1992; Abbott, 2001).

The subsequent forced migration brought about another turning point (second theme): participants experienced a sense of possibility grafted onto the obligation to escape to survive the Taliban violence. This possibility didn't come without inner conflict and guilt originating from the comparison with the destiny of loved ones and compatriots left behind. It thus acquires a tragic nuance, since, as outlined by Benasayag (2015), it highlights a sense of

shared identity and connection that extends beyond individual experience and involves the set of one's socioecological relationships and the way they are threatened by collective violence.

In the transition phase that followed the arrival in Italy (third theme), interviewees' ambivalent affective experiences were coupled with new personal possibilities and emergent relationships with the host society and the homeland which provided them with a novel sense of mastery. Notably, in this phase, the reconfiguration of one's future-oriented trajectory and one's horizon of meaning seems to be deeply bounded to the need to keep and negotiate the relationships with their country of origin, social groups and family, one more time emphasising the tragic dimension of their experience.

Here the metaphor of the 'Great Game' – that was widely used by the research participants, as well as by the historical–political literature to describe recurring dynamics that have shaped Afghanistan's history (e.g., Rashid, 2002) –, takes the status of 'historical signifier' (Alexander, 2012), i.e. a shared meaning that connects the study participants with other people around the world affected by similar oppressive dynamics and with the previous Afghan generations who suffered under Soviet and then Taliban rule. In this way, leveraging again a tragic dimension, a traumatic event may establish significant new connections (Hutchison, 2016), leading to the acquisition and development of a new extended social identity (Ballentyne et al., 2020; Muldoon et al., 2019). Acting as a cognitive and meaning-focused coping strategy, this metaphor gave historical depth – and therefore meaning – to the initially unintelligible event of the taking of Kabul and helped to overcome the sense of isolation, in this way resembling the 'trauma drama' process (Alexander, 2012) or 'political semiosis' (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017).

As the third theme shows, the complex bond with the participants' homeland, despite suffering, served as a call to action. The respondents started to imagine and negotiate alternative forms of commitment toward their country of origin, such as remote support, activism, testimony, and denunciation. These present-day 'battles' are supported by the possibility of envisioning a horizon of expectation – that of return – which challenges the current state of things and does not surrender to it. Similarly, Lim's (2021) research exploring the meanings of human rights activism and its driving forces among North Korean refugees in the UK identified the construct of altruistic political imagination – dreaming of inclusive future scenarios to move towards – as the motivational drive for social action. The political and social upheaval of August 2021 has undermined, but not erased, the image of a democratic and free Afghanistan to which personal and collective efforts were directed. Thus, the experience of the material destruction of the liberal Afghan society does not necessarily involve the fading of representations about an imagined, ideal Afghan society. As Jedlowski (2001) stated, these 'memories of the future', i.e. the possibilities imagined in the past, oscillating between the 'no more' and the 'not yet', are part of the present situation and give the chance to cultivate a sense of the possible by creatively facing periods of crisis. Taken together, these time jumps point towards a social, cultural and political psychology of collective memory and imagination (de Saint-Laurent et al., 2018) and its possible overlaps with the life-course theoretical framework (de Saint-Laurent, 2017). Finally, the condition of freedom and security granted to Afghan refugees in Italy, while offering relief from danger and deprivation, also carried an (again) tragic weight, since it could not be shared with their loved ones and people. The separation of families is a critical factor in understanding the emotional ambivalence pervading this turning point. According to Fischer (2017), families in Afghan society and in the diaspora are central to self-identification; they serve as important networks of trust and social

support that mediate access to asylum societies (Muldoon et al., 2019; Löbel & Jacobsen, 2021; Soller et al., 2018). Alemi and colleagues (2016) also found that family separation was a pivotal subjective cause of depressive symptoms experienced by Afghan refugees.

6. Limitations

This study has four main limitations which suggest possible future research lines. First, our analysis is limited to the Afghan refugees who settled in Italy. In this respect, it would be interesting to compare the experiences of our participants with those of their compatriots who fled to other countries to better explore the important role of contextual factors in the recovery process. Second, the research focused on individual experiences. However, future studies could delve into how identities, citizenships, and a sense of community are collectively negotiated in social contexts. Third, the 34 semi-structured interviews occurred relatively close to the critical event of Kabul's fall. Future longitudinal studies could investigate how the Afghan refugees' emotional experience and meaning-making processes differently shapes through time, confronting individual transitions and the historical evolution of the Afghan crisis.

Finally, dual language work comes with inherent challenges and limitations. The translation from one language to another inevitably constitutes a modulation within the discourse, mediates thoughts and emotions from their linguistic and cultural roots. Additionally, the pauses between questions and answers had an ambivalent meaning. They made the interviews less synchronous; on the other hand, they introduced moments of reflection on the development of the conversation and its potential ramifications. Finally, the basic attempt was to follow the direction indicated by the participants, resonating with the movement of their thoughts, and following its course, keeping the research questions in mind as a subtle reference guide. In the words of the certified interpreter and translator who helped us in our research and shared her thoughts on translation at the end of the research. Mediation and translation, especially in a non-native language, is a challenge to oneself and one's own abilities. It is an activity that involves not only linguistic and cultural skills, but also mental capacities. Mediation, as commonly understood, is not merely a tool to facilitate understanding, but rather a semiotic activity that involves the negotiation of meanings in social interaction.

7. Conclusions

We conducted 34 semi-structured interviews and a focus group with Afghan refugees who reached Italy after the Taliban takeover in August 2021. In sum, the results validate the analytical role of the concept of turning point to gain a thick understanding of migration and post-migration experiences, outlining an alternative perspective to the conventional focus on trauma and its pathological consequences. Furthermore, the identified turning points are pervaded by a tragic tension that foregrounds the relational dimension, highlighting the importance of social and historical bonds in the process of recovery, restoration of meaning and reorientation of life trajectories after the biographical ruptures caused by collective political violence and forced migration. These results lead to practical implications for the design of proper mental health, social, and community-based interventions which go beyond

the mere therapeutic stance and enhance refugees' voices, multifaced experiences, and skills, leveraging the relevance of the relational dimension in transition experiences. Specifically, the following areas of intervention can be identified. Firstly, a need to provide appropriate support for individuals who have undergone similar disruptive experiences, working for the enhancement and empowerment of their psychological resources and for assistance in the cultural and social transition to new environments. In particular, we believe that it is important to support these people in coping with their ambiguous and disturbing emotional experience of feeling in a safe place but never safe, as their own sense of security and well-being is invalidated by the critical conditions of their family members and compatriots. Mental health professionals could be essential in supporting individuals to cope and build resilience as well as identifying social contexts where migrants' experiences are valuable and useful for practical purposes. Successful integration and well-being can be achieved by providing community engagement activities which facilitate exchanges with the host community and at the same time allow the bond with the homeland to be preserved in a new way (e.g. supporting in translation, giving testimony in schools and universities, participating in community-based advocacy meetings, or in public debates about the multiple and interconnected crises of our time). Finally, cooperation between researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and community stakeholders can facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the Afghanistan political context and help the development of effective interventions and policies, specifically in the matter of family reunification projects.

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