

Making Meaning, Authenticity, and Redefining a Future in Former Refugees and Asylum Seekers Detained in Australia

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Abstract : Since 2013, the Australian government has enforced mandatory detention of anyone arriving in Australia without a valid visa, including those subsequently identified as a refugee or seeking asylum. While consistent with the increased use of immigration detention internationally, Australia's use of offshore processing facilities both during and subsequent to refugee status determination processing has until recently remained a unique feature of Australia's program of deterrence. The commonplace detention of refugees and asylum seekers following displacement is a significant and independent source of trauma and a contributory factor in adverse psychological outcomes. Officially, these individuals have no prospect of resettlement in Australia, are barred from applying for substantive visas, and are frequently and indefinitely detained in closed facilities such as immigration detention centres, or alternative places of detention, including hotels. It is also important to note that the limited access to Australia's immigration detention population made available to researchers often means that data available for secondary analysis may be incomplete or delayed in its release. Further, studies into the lived experience of refugees and asylum seekers are typically cross-sectional and convenience sampled, employing a variety of designs and research methodologies that limit comparability and focused on the immediacy of the individual's experience. Consequently, how former detainees make sense of their experience, redefine their future trajectory upon release, and recover a sense of authenticity and purpose, is unknown. As such, the present study sought the positive and negative subjective interpretations of 6 participants in Australia regarding their lived experiences as refugees and asylum seekers within Australia's immigration detention system and its impact on their future sense of self. It made use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a qualitative research methodology that is interested in how individuals make sense of, and ascribe meaning to, their unique lived experiences of phenomena. Underpinned by phenomenology, hermeneutics, and critical realism, this idiographic study aimed to explore both positive and negative subjective interpretations of former refugees and asylum seekers held in detention in Australia. It sought to understand how they make sense of their experiences, how detention has impacted their overall journey as displaced persons, and how they have moved forward in the aftermath of protracted detention in Australia. Examining the unique lived experiences of previously detained refugees and asylum seekers may inform the future development of theoretical models of posttraumatic growth among this vulnerable population, thereby informing the delivery of future mental health and resettlement services.

Keywords : mandatory detention, refugee, asylum seeker, authenticity, Interpretative phenomenological analysis

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