Article citation: Parker, S., Earnshaw, D., Penn, E. and Kumari, R. (2023). Uncertain Futures: Perceptions of Refugees in a Story Completion Task. *Qualitative Research Journal*. https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-11-2022-0145

Uncertain Futures: Perceptions of Refugees in a Story Completion Task

Abstract

Purpose

In recent years the movement of refugees has led to increasing negative media and political discourse about migration in the UK, particularly as the number of refugees crossing the English Channel has increased. Despite this hostility, little is known about how the UK public perceive the journeys made by refugees or the refugees themselves.

Design/methodology/approach

In this study we used a Story Completion method to analyse perceptions and understandings of refugees. Participants were given the opening of a story about refugees crossing the English Channel and were asked to complete the remainder of the story. In total 84 participants completed stories that ranged in length from two to 423 words. The stories were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Findings

Each of the completed stories was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis and three themes were generated: Conflicting emotions: Uncertainty and the relief of reaching safety after a traumatic journey; The spectre of illegality: borders and the uncertainty of what happens next; and Welcome or unwelcome?: Cultural values of welcome and hospitality.

Originality

We argue that this original use of the Story Completion method highlights how participants draw on cultural narratives of hospitality and welcome and that their stories are constructed using emotional categories that are in contrast to the more binary constructions of refugees that are present in media and government discourse about refugees and the English Channel crossings.

Keywords

Refugees, asylum seekers, story completion, perceptions, English Channel, migration

1. Introduction

In April 2022 the UK Government announced a new policy that proposes sending asylum seekers to Rwanda to have their asylum claims assessed there. Whilst this form of 'offshore processing' has been common practice in Australia for many years, the agreement with Rwanda would mark the first time that such a practice was employed by the UK Government. The policy, announced by UK Home Secretary Priti Patel, was justified based on the increase in the number of refugees crossing the English Channel in small boats that has occurred in recent years as other safe routes to claiming asylum in the UK have become more limited (Davies *et al*., 2021). The UK Government have argued that the new policy would reduce the ability of smugglers to profit from sending refugees across the Channel in dangerous conditions, however, such claims are widely disputed (Red Cross, 2022).

In 2021, 28,341 people crossed the English Channel in small boats from France to claim asylum in the UK (BBC, 2022), more than three times the number of the previous 12 months (Timberlake, 2021). It has been suggested that the initial increase in people crossing the Channel in this way was a result of people seeking to enter the UK before the departure from the European Union in January 2020, following the referendum in 2016 (Authors, 2022). However, this route has continued to see an increase in crossings since 2020 as the number of 'safe routes' to claiming asylum in the UK has been restricted by the current Conservative government, and by a reduction in lorries crossing the channel as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Davies *et al*., 2021). Whilst the media have referred to this as the 'English Channel migrant crisis' (Authors, 2022), echoing earlier constructions of migration crises in the Mediterranean Sea, less is known about how the British public perceive this 'crisis' or those who migrate via this route. Understanding these perceptions is important, particularly at the present time, when the UK Government has sought to justify its new policy of 'offshore processing' as being something that the British public want. This paper addresses the current gap in the literature using a story completion task that sought to understand how people construct understandings about this 'crisis' and the arrival of refugees via small boats in the UK. We therefore begin by discussing the recent history of English Channel crossings by those seeking safety in the UK, before reviewing research that explores understandings of, and attitudes, towards refugees and asylum seekers, to situate this research.

1.1 The 'English Channel migrant crisis'

During the summers of 2015 and 2016, news media around the world reported on the mass movement of people crossing the Mediterranean Sea to seek safety in Europe, referring to this predominantly in 'crisis' terms (Goodman *et al*., 2017). Even at this time, such discourses were not unique, reflecting that neither migration, nor the media's problematizing of migration are new phenomena (e.g. Gatrell, 2019). British media first reported on migrants attempting to cross the English Channel by boat in November 2018 (Maggs, 2019). Earlier media reports tended to frame the 'crisis' as one for Europe (Goodman *et al*., 2017), but Maggs (2019) suggests that this was now a 'new' perceived threat to the *British* border. It is unlikely that these however were the first attempts to cross the English Channel by boat, as Maggs (2019) highlights how two Syrian men in 2014 unsuccessfully made the crossing after having set out from Calais, with their bodies found on beaches in Norway and the Netherlands. However, Davies *et al*. (2021) point to a much longer history of Channel crossings and the role that British colonialism has played in this. What was perhaps new about the 2018 crossings was that it involved the use of smugglers, who began to send migrants across the channel on boats in significant numbers. Numbers making the crossing were initially small, at around 300 in the last 2 months of 2018, but this increased to an estimated 1,500 who were believed to have crossed in 2019 (Commons Library, 2019) and over 28,000 in 2021 (BBC, 2022). The initial political reaction suggested that smugglers may have been encouraging refugees to take the journey before the UK's initial planned departure from the EU on 29th March 2019 (Wolff, 2020). However, given that three years have now passed since this date, and despite delays to the final date of 'Brexit', it appears that the movement of people across the English Channel may relate more to a lack of safe routes to claim asylum in the UK, than about 'Brexit' itself.

1.2 Attitudes towards refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in the UK and Europe

It could be argued that government responses to immigration, such as those described above from the current UK government, reflect the general public's attitudes towards immigration and perceptions of migrants more generally. For example, during the years that New Labour were in government in the UK, immigration, and asylum seekers and refugees more specifically, were seen to be one of the biggest concerns of the UK public (Blinder and Allen, 2016). Crawley *et al*. (2013) reviewed attitudes towards refugees in this period from the British Social Attitudes Survey and found that the British public had

become less tolerant of refugees. However, they also noted that there were regional variations in attitudes, with London and Scotland displaying the most tolerant views. Responding to these concerns, Prime Minister Tony Blair made it his personal goal to reduce asylum applications that had reached their highest level in 2002 (Goodfellow, 2019), and asylum legislation was introduced on an unprecedented scale during this period. Much of this legislation remains in place today and has served as a building block for the more 'hostile' policies introduced by the subsequent Conservative-led governments (Goodfellow, 2019).

Whilst reducing immigration in general was seen as a key driver of the UK's decision to leave the EU in 2016 (Goodfellow, 2019), more recent evidence has suggested that, in the UK at least, immigration is no longer the top concern of the British public (Blinder and Richards, 2020). Dempster and Hargrave's (2017) research points to some of the difficulties in assuming that a softening of attitudes towards refugees in the UK has been universal. Whilst they found that some people were overwhelmingly hostile and others welcoming, importantly they highlight that most of their respondents were conflicted; feeling empathetic towards refugees, whilst at the same time also experiencing real anxieties about a range of issues including job security, public services, cultural change, and terrorism.

Research suggests that negative attitudes towards immigration are not confined to the UK and that there has been a hardening of attitudes across much of Europe since the 'refugee crisis' in 2015 (Rea *et al*., 2019). Czymara (2021) found that despite a reduction in the number of new refugees entering EU countries following a peak in 2016, attitudes towards accepting refugees in subsequent years hardened in countries such as Austria, Hungary and Germany. They suggest rather that it was the 'accumulation of foreigners' (Czymara, 2021, p.1326) that led to a decrease in openness towards refugees. However, Albada *et al*., (2021) have shown that in the Netherlands, attitudes towards refugees are polarised in a similar way to the UK, as highlighted by Dempster and Hargrave (2017). They suggest that there are groups at either end of a continuum with very pro- or anti-refugee attitudes, but that most of their respondents sat somewhere in the middle, indicating neither a strong attitude in favour of nor against refugees. Much of this attitudinal research uses national surveys, such as the European Social Survey and British Social Attitudes Survey and is therefore able to provide a broad overview of trends

in attitudes. More in-depth qualitative research has tended to focus on those with particularly extreme negative views (e.g., Burke and Goodman, 2012), however a growing body of research, particularly those adopting a critical discursive psychological approach, has tended to focus on the talk of those who Albada *et al*. (2021) might describe as being in the middle of the attitude polarisation they describe. For example, Kirkwood *et al*., (2014) analysed lay talk about refugee integration and found that accounts of integration 'success' may support ideas of assimilation and function to support the view that refugees do not integrate. As such, this highlights the importance of studying the variations and conflicting ideas in people's talk about attitudes towards refugees.

Discursive Psychological approaches have also been used to analyse political talk about refugees and asylum seekers. Goodman and Kirkwood (2019) demonstrate a number of dilemmas present in political and media talk about refugee integration in the UK. These are that integration is positive and necessary, but challenging; host communities are presented as welcoming, but there are limits to their capacity; refugees are responsible for integration, but host communities need to provide support; good refugees integrate, bad ones don't; and refugees are vulnerable and are skilled. In the context of the current paper, Authors (2022) analysed UK media reports about "English Channel migrant crossings". They found several contrasting repertoires used by the media in their reporting of this more recent "crisis" including a 'secure the borders' repertoire, a 'smuggling is immoral' repertoire and also a 'desperate people' repertoire. Whilst the first two of these repertoires positioned the movement of people across the English Channel as problematic, the final repertoire contrasted with this and worked to position the refugees themselves as vulnerable and in need of protection. These findings suggest that it is perhaps unsurprising that the general public is largely conflicted in their attitudes towards refugees (Dempster and Hargrave, 2017) when the media frames their reporting in such conflicting and contrasting ways.

1.3 The present study

Whilst it is often reported that the UK-public attitude towards refugees is largely negative (Blinder and Allen, 2016) and that media reporting of refugees also tends to position them in a negative light (Author, 2015; Goodman *et al*., 2017), little is known about how people draw on such cultural discourses in their

understanding of what happens to refugees when they arrive in the UK. The aim of this research is to use a story completion task to understand participants' perceptions and understandings of newly arrived refugees in the UK and to examine what social and cultural discourses are drawn upon by participants in constructing their stories.

The specific research questions are:

- How are refugees constructed in stories about their arrival in the UK?

- What cultural narratives are drawn on in stories about refugees?

In the next section we outline the methods used in this research and why a story completion method was chosen for this research.

2. Materials and methods

2.1 The story completion method

Story completion (SC) is a qualitative task that requires participants to write stories about hypothetical scenarios by responding to a story stem consisting of at least one sentence that has been made by the researcher (Kitzinger and Powell, 1995; Clarke *et al*., 2019). As such, it is a very different approach to other qualitative data collection methods, such as interviews or focus groups, as it does not involve self-report of individuals' personal views and/or experiences (Clarke *et al*., 2019). The SC task, which has its roots in psychoanalysis, is often used by psychiatrists and therapeutic practitioners to assess personality and psychopathology of individuals, as the task requires the client to draw on their own understandings and possibly reveal unconscious thoughts (Clarke *et al*., 2017). Whist SC research in psychology has been approached from such an essentialist theoretical perspective (e.g., Whitty, 2005) it has more commonly been used following a constructionist perspective (e.g., Kitzinger and Powell, 1995; Shah-Beckley and Clarke, 2021) where analysis focuses on identifying prevailing cultural discourses within participants' stories.

SC as a method has grown in popularity in recent years (Clarke *et al*., 2019) and is frequently used in research on topics that may be regarded as 'cultural taboos' to avoid participants' directly

reporting or having to account for their views (Shah-Beckley and Clarke, 2021). This has included topics such as sexual infidelity (Clarke *et al*., 2015); shame (Drini, 2019); sexual refusal (Shah-Beckley and Clarke, 2021); eating disorders (Walsh and Malson, 2010); child sex offenders (Gavin, 2005); body hair practices (Jennings *et al*., 2019) and post-Covid futures in a gamified version of the SC method (Troiano *et al*., 2021). Talk about migration (particularly refugees and asylum seekers) could, we would suggest, be seen in similar terms. Whilst not being a 'taboo' subject as such, it may be one in which participants would not wish to account for their views in a more traditional self-report data collection method such as interviews. It is acknowledged that it could be a divisive topic, politically and culturally, and we therefore felt it fitted well with the aims of a constructionist approach to SC research.

2.2 Participants and procedure

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee at the authors' university. Participants were recruited via a university Research Participation Scheme and through advertisements on social media. Of 84 participants who completed the story stem, 78 identified as female and 6 as male. Given that the majority of participants were recruited via a Research Participation Scheme, it was more difficult to recruit male participants due to the preponderance of female psychology undergraduate students. The ages of participants ranged from 19 to 55 (Mean: 22.2) and the majority of participants identified as White (61%).

Participants were provided a link to a Qualtrics survey which gave information about the study and requested their consent to participate in the study. Following this, participants were presented with the following story stem and instructions for completing their story:

Please read and complete the following story:

Last night they had boarded the small boat on a beach in France with a group of 20 other refugees. When the boat landed on a beach in England…….

What happens next? (Please spend at least 5 minutes writing your story).

The story stem was designed by the research team following the guidelines of Clarke *et al*. (2019). As such we chose to have a short story stem that would allow for participants to add their own interpretation

and detail to their story. We wanted the focus of the stories to be on what happened to the refugees when they arrived in the UK, rather than the journey itself, primarily for ethical reasons. We also did not want to specify a particular main character (in terms of gender or age) as is common in SC stems. This was so that the assumptions made by participants could be drawn on as part of our analysis. We also made the conscious decision to not include about the boat being intercepted before reaching the beach in England, due to the way this has been presented and discussed in published media and considered that it could influence their stories. In common with previous SC studies, we felt it was important to provide clear instructions to participants (Clarke *et al*., 2017) and therefore asked participants to spend at least 5 minutes writing their stories. The length of completed stories ranged between 2 and 423 words (Mean: 95 words), reflecting a mixed level of engagement with the task that has been reported in other studies using this method (Clarke *et al*., 2019; Shah-Beckley and Clarke, 2021).

2.3 Analytic method

SC data, as we discussed above, can be approached from both an essentialist or constructionist theoretical perspective and has typically been analysed using either thematic analysis or discourse analysis in most published research (Clarke *et al*., 2019). Given we were interested in participants understandings and the cultural discourses drawn on in their stories we approached the data analysis from a constructionist perspective. The data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) by the first author and discussed at each stage with the second author. We began the process of analysis by reading through each of the stories several times in order to become familiar with the data. During these read throughs we began to add codes to the stories that focussed on how the story was structured, the characters used in the story and the cultural discourses used in the construction of the stories. During this process we also noted how emotions were a particular feature of most stories and conducted a further round of coding where we noted all instances of differing emotions being used in the stories. Initial themes were developed based around the use of these emotions and then refined in consideration of the story structures and the ways in which participants drew on cultural discourses of welcome/unwelcome and the role of borders.

3. Results

In this section we present three themes that were constructed/identified in our analysis of the completed stories. The first two of these themes relate to conflicting ideas and uncertainty; firstly, in terms of the emotions experienced by refugees, and secondly relating to the legality of what those in the stories are doing and what happens to them next. Our final theme demonstrates how participants drew on cultural discourses of welcome and hospitality when constructing their stories. The story extracts presented here are as they were written and have not been corrected for spelling or grammar. We also provide the participant number and how the participant described their sex or gender identity and age.

3.1 Conflicting emotions: Uncertainty and the relief of reaching safety after a traumatic journey

This first theme reflects many of the conflicting emotions that were noted as part of the coding process. It suggests that participants understand the journey taken by refugees as a traumatic one and arriving in the UK as a confusing time with contrasting emotions of relief and fear for the future.

In many stories, this contrast of emotions related specifically to the journey the refugees had just made across the English Channel:

> *Only two stepped off the boat. An atmosphere full of grief, sadness and loss surrounded them. They were relieved to have survived the traumatic journey they have just had, however they loss was looming over them. Something they don't think they'll ever overcome.* (P13, F, 19)

> *They lay on the beach exhausted but relieved to have arrived safely. They also felt sad that they had left so many behind. They knew so many had no made it and many yet won't make it safely like they had. They were so tired though they could barely pick their heads up off the sand. They had been over 8 hours in that freezing water. The sound of the children crying had been so hard - but now they were silent - exhausted too.* (P54, F, 48)

In each of these examples the difficult circumstances of the journey are described in emotional terms, with the overall emphasis on the journey being traumatic whilst the overriding emotion on arrival is described as 'relief'. Such stories suggest that participants attempt to empathise with those who risk their lives seeking safety in this way, and offer humanistic qualities, which contrasts with how these individuals are often portrayed in media publications.

In other examples, the emotions constructed in the stories drew on implicit or explicit contrasts with the refugees' past lives, demonstrating that participants understood the process of seeking safety as a longer journey and that the crossing of the English Channel may be the final part of that journey:

> *Everyone on board was anxious yet relieved. Although everything looked really foreign and scary, the people on board overlooked that aspect because they now felt safe and away from all the violence and uncertainty. They were now one step closer to a new life and a new beginning.* (P24, F, 21)

> *They were petrified, but also excited that they were now in a place they felt safe and could live with their families without fear.* (P38, F, 20)

> *They got off the boat, feeling hopeful for the future. Reflecting on the traumatic experiences of their homeland, they felt relieved about having fled but worried about the consequences of entering a country that may never fully accept them.* (P62, F, 19)

Each example provides a more negative backstory to the refugees, with focus on fear, violence, and trauma. Safety was noted as being the endgame, with prospects identified positively. The last extract presented here however noted potential negativity about arriving in the UK, with consideration being shown of xenophobia and of not being fully accepted. Often, the media has perpetuated resistance to accepting those making the crossing, with misinformation being offered about accessing money, homes, and jobs. However, the stories constructed here resist such constructions with their focus on emotions during the journey and in the overall experience of becoming a refugee.

3.2 The spectre of illegality: borders and the uncertainty of what happens next

This theme draws on the cultural narrative evident in many of the stories that attempting to enter a country in this way is illegal and its borders should be protected and respected. It particularly reflects the view that those making the crossing recognise this as being illegal and will make efforts to avoid capture by border officials.

> *They were confronted by security on the border of the country. They were detained for crossing the border illegally and questioned.* (P27, F, 21)

> *they were greeted by an army of men wearing all black who held weapons. The men shouted aggressively in another language. We were frightened, cold and confused. Those of us that tried to run were tackled to the ground. We were directed into vehicles and the drive was long. None of us knew what would happen to us. When we had finally arrived at where the mysterious men had taken us, they took us into a building with concrete walls and metal bars under bright fluorescent lights. We were offered food, drink and fresh clothes.* (P58, F, 24)

Both examples demonstrate a form of interaction between the refugees and border patrol, with each of the stories either explicitly or implicitly drawing on the discourse of border protection. Instead of being shown compassion and empathy for their journey, those making the crossing are initially met with resistance and an unwelcoming reception. Most examples portrayed border patrol with an almost militia-style response, as if to convey a more significant dichotomy between the two groups. However, even in some of these examples, the stories draw on the emotional experience for the refugees, such as fear and uncertainty, which in some examples here are constructed as a result of interactions with border patrol, rather than the journey itself.

Other examples demonstrated a different style of arrival and concentrated on the activities of those making the crossing once they had reached the shore.

> *They all got off on the beach, checked that there was nobody there waiting to apprehend them and ran off with their families. They then followed the roads to the nearest town/village and had to sleep on the streets or find some kind of shelter for a few nights. In the following days the adults probably looked for jobs, mainly minimum wage or even off the record jobs that just pay low amounts of cash.* (P17, M, 21)

> *they fled as fast as they could incase anyone was waiting for them upon arrival. They ran to the nearest village and tried to find shelter. As they walked through the village, people were staring at them and shouting racial abuse. One of the refugees, a young girl, was sent into a shop in the village to ask for some food in exchange for some coins they had brought from home. The old shopkeeper saw the group of other refugees outside and yelled at them to leave, but the shopkeepers wife smuggled the young girl some apples .* (P39, F, 21)

Both indicative examples here note the speed of which those making the crossing in the stories need to work at to ensure they evade capture by border officials. As such, there is an implication within the stories that refugees recognise that entering a country in this way is illegal. The stories all noted how the refugees' futures were undetermined, but that moving inland away from the coast was priority, as was securing food and shelter. Some examples included racism and xenophobia, with the second example here demonstrating gendered compassion between the two female characters.

3.3 Welcome or unwelcome?: Cultural values of welcome and hospitality

This theme also draws on the emotions within the stories but recognises that participants understood refugees as confused and cautious on arrival, and that their subsequent actions would depend on the

welcome they received (linked to previous themes). Within this theme refugees are presented as either unsure of what to expect or with a clear plan (drawing on the narrative of migrants as welfare tourists).

Within the data set there were examples where the British public were constructed as open and welcoming to refugees:

> *They were dazzled by the beauty England had to offer. They were welcomed with open arms and excited for their new life ahead of them. Families gathered and collected their belonging as they made their way across the soft warm sand beneath their feet. Smiles were seen on every face around as they made their way to their new and improved lives.* (P8, F, 19)

Here the participant's story is constructed based on discourses of welcome and hospitality and in overwhelmingly positive terms ("with open arms"), such that the positive welcome the refugees received is seen to lead to "new and improved lives" for the refugees. This example is in contrast to both some of the stories discussed in the previous section and also UK government discourse and policy on "migrant crossings" which has sought to create a "hostile" rather than welcoming environment for refugees entering the UK. This discourse of being "unwelcome" was more evident in other stories that were constructed in more mixed or explicitly negative and unwelcome terms:

> *People looked at them like the scum of the earth....dodgy and potential terrorists. Why are they coming to our great country to benefit from our great economy and wonderful civilisation? They come for free handouts and eventually take all our jobs! they should go back where ever the came from. However, there were also compassionate souls who welcomed us and supported us and made us feel at "home" and made us feel "safe". But those initial voices stays at the back of your mind forever .....However long you live in the country, you always know that you are not really welcome..you are not one of us.* (P33, F, 39)

> *They were welcomed with a mixed reception of 'Welcome Home' banners from supportive well wishers and shouts from the 'patriotic' nationals that thought they were protecting their homeland from an outside threat. They were escorted to their next refugee camp, sheltered with not much food but they were warm and safe from the cold, the threats of their old life and the people who did not want them there.* (P9, F, 20)

The negative receptions in these stories all centred-on 'patriotic' Brits utilising viewpoints of safety and concern for their own citizens, and the impact that the refugees would have upon their lives. Such stories also drew on constructions of hospitality and welcome being taken advantage of by refugees and as such reflect the overall discourse from the current UK Government of deterring refugees from entering the UK. The final example presented here is also interesting in that it reflects the polarised welcomes and attitudes towards refugees that are so often seen in the UK and are also present in recent UK

government refugee policy between the deterrence of refugees crossing the English Channel and the "Homes for Ukraine" scheme which encouraged British people to offer a welcome and space in their home for Ukrainian refugees.

4. Discussion

Attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers have fluctuated over time (Blinder and Richards, 2020) and have at times been seen as the number one issue of concern for British people (Blinder and Allen, 2016). As such, it is often assumed that the British public generally hold negative attitudes towards refugees, and this has been used as the basis of claims by successive UK governments to introduce increasingly more hostile policies to try to limit the number of refugees entering the UK (Goodfellow, 2019). Our findings here point to a more complicated picture and demonstrate that most participants constructed their stories using emotional terms that reflected the difficult and traumatic journeys that the refugees had been on (in both their home countries and throughout their flight). Throughout the themes that we presented, the emotion of feeling uncertain, was one that was particularly pertinent, and related to not only aspects of stories about the journey itself, but more broadly about the situation faced by refugees and what would happen to them in the future. Whilst media and political discourse has frequently portrayed refugees and asylum seekers as more calculated tacticians, security threats or 'benefit tourists' (e.g., Pickering, 2001; Esses *et al.*, 2013) who know how to take advantage of the UK's asylum system, the responses from the participants in this study suggest an alternative understanding of refugees. That is, that those crossing the English Channel do so without knowing what they will do next, and that fear and uncertainty are the overriding emotions for refugees when they arrive in the UK.

In addition to understanding how people perceive refugees, we were also interested in the cultural narratives drawn on by participants when constructing their stories. Here we found that participants drew on cultures of welcome and hospitality when constructing their stories. In this sense the welcome could be either positive or negative, but even in the more negative stories it was this narrative that was drawn on rather than explicitly narratives of border protection which has been found in past research on media and political discourse (e.g., Pickering, 2001; Author, 2015). This is not to

say that some stories did not implicitly mention protecting borders but rather that it was framed more in terms of welcome and hospitality within these stories.

To our knowledge this is the first time that a Story Completion task has been used to explore understandings of, and attitudes towards, refugees. Previous research into attitudes towards refugees has tended to use quantitative measures to provide a broad overview of changing attitudes of the British public (e.g., Blinder and Richards, 2020). From a qualitative perspective, research has tended to focus on media and political discourses about refugees (e.g., Moore *et al*., 2018; Authors, 2022) while analysis of people's talk has been more limited and focussed on online or focus group data (e.g., Goodman and Burke, 2010; 2011; Burke and Goodman, 2012). We would argue that for this topic, which can be regarded as a difficult or sensitive topic for many, the Story Completion method offers participants the chance to construct their stories without fear of judgement that could be a feature of other data collection methods. As such, we agree with Clarke *et al*. (2021) that Story Completion tasks make an interesting and alternative way of tapping into understandings that should be used for a wider range of research topics.

One potential limitation of the present study relates to the participant sample. Whilst student samples have been common in other published Story Completion studies (e.g., Clarke and Braun, 2019; Hayfield and Wood, 2019; McDonald and Braun, 2022), and we would argue were appropriate for this study, it should be noted that most of the sample were aged 19 to 21. Given that the "refugee crisis" in various forms has been spoken about frequently in the media since at least 2015, we suggest that this age group are likely to have some level of knowledge about refugees and that the Story Completion task allows a different way of exploring their understandings than would other data collection methods that may ask more direct questions about the topic. We would also agree with Clarke *et al*. (2017) about the importance, when using this method, of taking time to consider the construction of the story stem given to participants. For example, whilst we deliberately left the story stem open and to some extent ambiguous, it was a surprise to us that so many of the stories concentrated on the journey or the lives of refugees prior to making the journey.

Our findings overall, using the Story Completion method, point to the ways in which understandings of refugees are perhaps not as polarised as is often claimed when measured using binary scales that is often a feature of attitude-based research on this topic. As we have shown here, most of our participants constructed their stories using strong emotional terms, and that the use of emotion language was present even in stories that could be described as more anti-refugee. This is also in direct contrast to media, and particularly, political discourse on this topic which has tended to focus mostly on issues of border security (Authors, 2022). It therefore calls into question the discourse that has come from the UK Government in recent years, which has suggested that the British public expects the government to be tough on those who seek to enter the country illegally, and which has culminated in the heavily criticised policy to deport those who cross the English Channel by boat to Rwanda to hear their asylum claims. This policy, and the discourse it uses in making its appeal to the British people, makes a distinction between those who enter the country 'legally' and 'illegally' fails to recognise that refugees lack safe and legal routes to claiming asylum in the UK and therefore treats all migrants as a homogenous group who can either be 'legal' or 'illegal'. However, our findings here demonstrate that the British public do not view refugees in such binary terms and recognise the emotional experience and lack of choice they face in reaching safe destinations such as the UK where they can apply for asylum and rebuild their lives.

References

Albada, K., Hansen, N. and Otten, S. (2021), Polarization in attitudes towards refugees and migrants in the Netherlands. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 51 No. 3, pp.627-643.

BBC. (2022), Channel migrants: Crossing numbers in 2021 triple 2020's figure. Available at https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-kent-59861376 (accessed 20 January 2022)

Blinder, S. and Allen, W. (2016), UK public opinion toward immigration: Overall attitudes and level of concern. *Migration Observatory briefing, COMPAS, University of Oxford*.

Blinder, S. and Richards, L. (2020), UK public opinion toward immigration: Overall attitudes and level of concern. *Migration Observatory briefing, COMPAS, University of Oxford*.

Burke, S. and Goodman, S. (2012), 'Bring back Hitler's gas chambers': Asylum seeking, Nazis and Facebook–a discursive analysis. *Discourse and Society*, Vol. 23 No.1, pp.19-33.

Clarke, V. and Braun, V. (2019), How can a heterosexual man remove his body hair and retain his masculinity? Mapping stories of male body hair depilation. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp.96-114.

Clarke, V., Braun, V., Frith, H. and Moller, N. (2019), Editorial introduction to the special issue: using story completion methods in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp.1-20.

Clarke, V., Braun, V. and Wooles, K. (2015), Thou shalt not covet another man? Exploring constructions of same-sex and different-sex infidelity using story completion. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 25 No. 2, pp.153-166.

Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., Moller, N. and Tischner, I. (2017), Once upon a time…: Story completion methods. The Open University.

Commons Library. (2019), *Migrants crossing the English Channel*. Commons Library. Available at: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/insights/migrants-crossing-the-english-channel/ (accessed 20 January 2022)

Crawley, H., Drinkwater, S. and Kauser, R. (2013), *Regional variations in attitudes towards refugees: evidence from Great Britain*. Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration (CReAM), Department of Economics, University College London.

Czymara, C. S. (2021), Attitudes toward refugees in contemporary Europe: A longitudinal perspective on cross-national differences. *Social Forces*, Vol. 99 No. 3, pp.1306-1333.

Davies, T., Isakjee, A., Mayblin, L. and Turner, J. (2021), Channel crossings: offshoring asylum and the afterlife of empire in the Dover Strait. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 44 No.13, pp. 2307-2327.

Dempster, H. and Hargrave, K. (2017), Understanding public attitudes towards refugees and migrants. *London: Overseas Development Institute and Chatham House*.

Drini, E. (2020), *Therapists' discursive constructions of shame: a story-completion task* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Surrey).

Esses, V. M., Medianu, S. and Lawson, A. S. (2013), Uncertainty, threat, and the role of the media in promoting the dehumanization of immigrants and refugees. *Journal of social issues*, Vol. 69 No. 3, pp.518-536.

Gabrielatos, C. and Baker, P. (2008), Fleeing, sneaking, flooding: A corpus analysis of discursive constructions of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK press, 1996-2005. *Journal of English linguistics*, Vol. 36 No.1, pp.5-38.

Gavin, H. (2005), The social construction of the child sex offender explored by narrative. *The Qualitative Report*, Vol. 10 No.3, pp.395-413.

Goodfellow, M. (2019), *Hostile environment: How immigrants became scapegoats*. Verso Books, London.

Goodman, S. and Burke, S. (2010), 'Oh you don't want asylum seekers, oh you're just racist': A discursive analysis of discussions about whether it's racist to oppose asylum seeking. *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 21 No.3, pp.325-340.

Goodman, S. and Burke, S. (2011), Discursive deracialization in talk about asylum seeking. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 21 No.2, pp.111-123.

Goodman, S. and Kirkwood, S. (2019), Political and media discourses about integrating refugees in the UK. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 49 No.7, pp.1456-1470.

Goodman, S., Sirriyeh, A. and McMahon, S. (2017), The evolving (re) categorisations of refugees throughout the "refugee/migrant crisis". *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 27 No. 2, pp.105-114.

Hayfield, N. and Wood, M. (2019), Looking heteronormatively good! Combining story completion with Bitstrips to explore understandings of sexuality and appearance. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp.115-135.

Jennings, E., Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2019), Breaking gendered boundaries? Exploring constructions of counter-normative body hair practices in Āotearoa/New Zealand using story completion. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp.74-95.

Kirkwood, S., McKinlay, A. and McVittie, C. (2015), 'He's a cracking wee geezer from Pakistan': Lay accounts of refugee integration failure and success in Scotland. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol.28 No. 1, pp.1-20.

Kitzinger, C. and Powell, D. (1995), Engendering infidelity: Essentialist and social constructionist readings of a story completion task. *Feminism and Psychology*, Vol.5 No.3, pp. 345-372.

Maggs, J. (2020), The 'Channel Crossings' and the borders of Britain. *Race and Class*, Vol. 61 No.3, pp.78-86.

McDonald, A. and Braun, V. (2022), Right, yet impossible? Constructions of healthy eating. *SSM-Qualitative Research in Health*, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmqr.2022.100100

Moore, K., Berry, M. and Garcia-Blanco, I. (2018), Saving refugees or policing the seas? How the national press of five EU member states framed news coverage of the migration crisis. *Justice, Power and Resistance*, Vol.2 No.1, pp.66-95.

Author (2015). Removed for Peer Review

Authors (2022). Removed for Peer Review

Pickering, S. (2001), Common sense and original deviancy: News discourses and asylum seekers in Australia. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol.14 No.2, pp.169-186.

Rea, A., Martiniello, M., Mazzola, A. and Meuleman, B. (2019), *The refugee reception crisis in Europe. Polarized opinions and mobilizations*. Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, Brussels.

Red Cross. (2022), *Statement responding to Rwanda offshoring deal*. https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/news-and-media/media-centre/press-releases/statement-responding-to-rwanda-offshoring-deal (accessed 14 April 2022)

Shah-Beckley, I. and Clarke, V. (2021), Exploring therapists' and psychology students' constructions of sexual refusal in heterosexual relationships: A qualitative story completion study. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, Vol. 21 No.4, pp.946-956.

Shah-Beckley, I., Clarke, V. and Thomas, Z. (2020), Therapists' and non-therapists' constructions of heterosex: A qualitative story completion study. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, Vol.93 No.2, pp.189-206.

Timberlake, F. (2021). The UK's Policy Response to Small Boat Crossings in the Channel. Refugee Rights. Available at: https://refugee-rights.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/RRE_ BoatCrossingsInTheChannel-Timeline.pdf. (accessed 20 January 2022).

Troiano, G. M., Wood, M., Sonbudak, M. F., Padte, R. C., and Harteveld, C. (2021, June). "Are We Now Post-COVID?": Exploring Post-COVID Futures Through a Gamified Story Completion Method. In *Designing Interactive Systems Conference 2021*, pp. 48-63.

Walsh, E. and Malson, H. (2010), Discursive constructions of eating disorders: A story completion task. *Feminism and Psychology*, Vol. 20 No.4, pp.529-537.

Whitty, M. T. (2005), The realness of cybercheating: Men's and women's representations of unfaithful Internet relationships. *Social science computer review*, Vol.23 No.1, pp.57-67.

Wolff, S. (2020). Channel crossings, migration, and Franco-British cooperation. Queen Mary University of London. Available at: https://www.qmul.ac.uk/gpi/news-and-events/news/channel-crossings-migration-and-franco-british-cooperation.html (accessed 20 January 2022)