“On the Way to Freedom”: An Ethnographic Appreciation of the Life Projects of Unaccompanied Minor Asylum-Seekers Who Flee From Africa, Cross the Mediterranean Sea, and Finish Up on the Island of Malta

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Abstract
The arrival of migrants from various parts of Africa in relatively large numbers to the central Mediterranean island of Malta was an unprecedented experience for the locals prior to the early 2000s. This article focuses on exploring the processes that unaccompanied minors go through to become asylum-seekers in Europe and to move on from there to further evolve their life projects. It also explores the role that ethnographers play in retelling their stories, so as to show how these transitions can be better understood. This is particularly because, in most cases, Malta serves as a transit country which they will eventually leave to settle elsewhere. The article shows how the active participation of ethnographers does not simply serve as an “add on” to the data acquired but rather contributes to a co-construction of meanings in an inter-cooperative way.

Keywords
asylum-seekers, diversity and multiculturalism, ethnography, qualitative appreciation, social sciences

Introduction
This article aims to acquire a greater depth of conceptual understanding of asylum-seeking young people’s life projects. It focuses on how ethnographic methods are used in order to explore how the migrants’ migration plan fits in with their own evolving life projects on having left Africa but not yet made it to their long-term destination of choice. This focus on forging a future and being proactive in its construction contrasts with studies that tend to focus on the problems that migrants from an asylum-seeking background face, including those that specifically target understanding how they confront trauma-inducing events such as violence, major disruptions, and (sometimes intense) experiences of loss (Essuman-Johnson, 2011; Huijts, Kleijn, van Emmerik, Noordhof, & Smith, 2012; Norredam, Jensen, & Ekstrøøm, 2011; Schmitter-Heisler, 2000). The article focuses on a topical subject. When the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1951, it is estimated that there were 1.5 million refugees worldwide (McMaster, 2001). However, at the end of 2009, there were an estimated 43.3 million forcibly displaced people. These included 15.2 million refugees, 983,000 asylum-seekers, and 27.1 million internally displaced persons. It is believed that there were an additional 25 million people displaced due to natural disasters (Phillips, 2011). In 2011 alone, more than 876,000 people worldwide appealed for refugee status, 34% of whom were younger than 18 years (UNHCR, 2012).

Different factors impinge on the realities that migrants from an asylum-seeking background face, depending on which part of the world they are coming from, whether they are internally displaced or whether they succeed in leaving the countries of origin, and whether the reception that they face, when eventually setting foot in other countries, is hospitable. The article is focused on the lives asylum-seekers live when arriving at the central Mediterranean island of Malta, which is the author’s home country. The island has a total land area of 316 square kilometers and a total population of around 420,000 inhabitants. It has its own language, Maltese, which is written using a Latin script, although much

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of its lexicon derives from Arabic. Most Maltese speak English, a good percentage of them, fluently. Malta is a European Union (EU) country. It derives much of its income from tourism.

Very few migrants aspire to come to the island out of choice. Many aspire to reach Italy, Sicily, or one of the other Italian islands. Inevitably, as the Italian islands form part of Italy, they are associated more with the European mainland than is the case with Malta. Because Malta is detached by sea and is too small to be considered a typical European country, it is unlikely to be seen as offering young asylum-seekers the possibilities of building the ‘better life’ that they desire. The Italian islands in closest proximity to Malta are Lampedusa (which has around 4,500 inhabitants), which is located to the south of Sicily, and Linosa (which has around 450 inhabitants), which is located between Lampedusa and Malta. Throughout the past decade, Lampedusa has been receiving approximately 15,000 to 20,000 (irregular) migrants annually. In 2011, this figure shot up to 51,000, possibly as a result of the civil war in Libya, and the Arab Spring turmoil in Tunisia. Although the number of arrivals decreased to approximately 15,000 people in 2012, the figures increased once again in 2013 to more than 30,000 (Triandafyllidou, 2014).

Malta, itself, is located 290 kilometers from the northern coast of Tunisia and 360 kilometers from Libya. It is closer to the North African mainland than the Italian islands are. Malta is one of the EU’s southernmost countries. Between 2005 and 2012, Malta received around 22 asylum-seeking migrants per 1,000 inhabitants (UNHCR, 2012). On average, since 2002, Malta has received some 1,500 to 2,000 irregular migrants and asylum-seekers per year (Spiteri, 2012). Of the 9,554 immigrants who arrived in Malta, in an irregular way, during the period 2005 to 2009, about one third were Somali citizens. The second largest nationality group were the Eritreans (1,259), followed by the Egyptians (755), the Nigerians (652), and the Sudanese (596) (Triandafyllidou & Maroukis, 2012). According to figures issued by the UNHCR, 1,579, 1,890, and 2,008, people arrived in Malta, in 2011, 2012 and 2013, respectively.

Most of the migrants who end up in Malta usually do so because of loss of bearing (generally the people steering the boats were simply chosen from among the people present at the departure-point, and had no prior maritime experience), the arising of increment weather when at sea, or through needing “rescue,” as a result of being in distress. This implies that, in all probability, Malta is mainly an asylum receiving destination because of its geographic location. Having said this, the migration process is not only influenced by what aspiring migrants leave behind (the “push factors”) but also what they would anticipate on arrival (the “pull factors”). In effect, at a grass-roots level, the exchange of information, between migrants who had settled in Europe and those who were aspiring to leave Africa so as come to Europe, served to make it increasingly possible for them to flee from their homelands in this way. They were better informed about what to expect once in Malta. Massey (1990) refers to this as “cumulative causation” wherein people encourage others to follow in their footsteps on certain migration routes. However, to date, no study has been undertaken to determine what asylum-seekers know about Malta prior to their arrival here. Gilbert and Koser (2006) point out that when migrants join kin and people they know, the decision to migrate is one which is more rational than that where migrants leave certain decisions in the hands of others, and leave themselves vulnerable to more random factors, like the decisions of smugglers. Perhaps, in the Maltese contexts, both arguments are equally as valid, as while it is possible that some asylum-seekers choose Malta as a destination because they believe that they would find support on the island from other migrants, others end up on the island without having imagined they would ever go there, or possibly without having heard of the island previously.

In an article which is aimed at understanding young people’s life projects, the role of smugglers must not go unmentioned, as it is most likely that the migrants would have availed themselves of the services they provided prior to coming to Malta, at one point or another. On an transnational level, the smugglers are often described as forming part of the black or subversive economy which appears to be so well organized and threatens to weaken state institutions, in this case, particularly EU countries. Smugglers do this by impinging negatively on their ability to control their self-defined domain. Such activities can be said to subvert state power as they are characterized by transgressions of their borders. On an individual level, these activities have resulted in EU responses that have been designed to prevent asylum-seekers from making the crossing across the Mediterranean, including the help offered by the EU to Libya to control its vast southern border and the strengthening of the bilateral relations between Italy and Libya, when Libya was under the leadership of Muammar Muhammad Abu Minyar al-Gaddafi. This has translated into some of the migrants finding themselves at risk of being returned forcibly, to unsafe countries (Triandafyllidou, 2014). Having stated this, it remains to be pointed out that even though human rights violations, against returnees and other people, particularly came to light when the Libyan Gaddafi government was overthrown, the reality that crossings from Africa to Europe are still taking place shows that the EU has had little success in dissuading people from Africa from crossing the Mediterranean Sea with the intention of settling elsewhere.

As time has passed, “what has been termed as ‘Fortress Europe’ has become increasingly restrictive for non-EU nationals, in particular non-Europeans” (Pisani, 2012, p. 186). This is accentuated by the fact that Malta (as does other EU member states) enforces a strict automatic detention policy for people who arrive in the country as irregular immigrants. Although some migrants, including families with young children, are released within hours or days,
others can be detained for up to a year. Those who are denied asylum can be detained for up to 18 months. Although technically, they would be asked to leave Malta, or face forcible deportation, sometimes, it is impossible for Malta to deport them, as would be the case if their countries of origin adopt an uncooperative stance to their return. This results in their staying on without authorization to do so, (Noll, 1999). Unaccompanied minor asylum-seekers can benefit from a fast-track route to enable them to be released from detention; however, in cases where they look older, they may be subject to an age determination process. Age testing on minors has attracted harsh criticism on the grounds that some young people mature quicker than others, making it indeed difficult to determine how old they are in a conclusive way (Spiteri, 2012). The rules about what makes someone a child also leave a lot of space for subjective interpretation by assessors (Jesuit Refugee Service [JRS], 2010). This assessment can, at times, translate effectively into children not being released from detention for several months. Added to this, despite that detention policies such as those applicable in Malta can be seen as irreconcilable with the European Convention on Human Rights, particularly the right to liberty and security as defined in Article 5 of the said Convention (Council of Europe [CoE], 2011); the Maltese government has constantly adhered to these policies so as to discourage aspiring migrants who are unable to procure the requisite documentation from attempting to flee to Europe via Malta. Normally, the asylum-seeking procedure takes several months at minimum (JRS, 2005, 2010).

These detention policies are aligned to the EU’s recognizing that Member States with more favorable procedures could attract more asylum-seekers than others which would imply not only that they put themselves at a disadvantage but that they would increase the number of immigrants overall in the EU. So as to allay these fears about indiscriminately rising population figures due to what is seen as mass scale migrations, various European countries have adopted policies that bring conditions in detention more in line with one another. This was particularly seen in the period subsequent to the Tampere European Council of 1999, wherein it was recommended that EU member states work toward a Common European Asylum System (CEAS). Subsequent directives, for instance, the Council Directive 2003/9/EC of January 27, 2003, did not only lay down minimum standards for the reception of asylum-seekers, but also, and this was also particularly emphasized in the proposal of the December 9, 2008 which amended it, to reception conditions being “comparable throughout the Union, irrespective of where an asylum application has been made” (European Commission, 2011, p. 2).

The Directive could be seen in two ways. On one hand, it can be seen as giving migrants a better deal by offering them better conditions Europe-wide (even though it leaves the reception of asylum-seekers as the prerogative of each member-state individually). On the other hand, it can be seen as reinforcing the North–South divide. Even though the EU allows free movement of its citizens, thereby entitling them to inclusion in various spheres of life, including the labor market, in Europe, it excludes all those who are not EU citizens and makes this exclusion effective in a relatively uniform way (Castles & Miller, 2003, p. 4). This desire to enforce boundaries is not particular to Europe. Writing about the United States, Singer, Hardwick, and Brettell (2008) write,

Coupled with fairly widespread economic and political insecurity, and spurred on by the larger and acrimonious national debate swelling around illegal immigration, the public is wary about changes happening around them. City, county, and municipal officials are pressured to “do something” about immigration. (pp. 308-309)

Children and young people under the age of 18 are offered a fast-track route out of detention. However, just like adults, they may have been victims of torture, trafficking, and sexual exploitation, and at other times, they may have witnessed certain atrocities taking place. Within the legal context of the EU, children are given special consideration legally. Such instruments as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; see articles 3 and 20) and also the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (see Article 24) assign states the duty of care for children. States must safeguard the best interests of children applying for international protection. In effect, they being given priority in the EU Stockholm program. This attention to their particular needs adds testimony to their vulnerability and the need for states to be responsive to their particular needs (Roscam Abbing, 2011).

Under Maltese law, a distinction is drawn between accompanied and unaccompanied minor asylum-seekers, and whereas there have been cases where accompanied minor asylum-seekers have been deported, unaccompanied minor asylum-seekers do not normally face a similar immediate threat of deportation. This is because if the parents of accompanied minor asylum-seekers are forcibly removed from the country, their children are expected to go with them. In contrast, unaccompanied minor asylum-seekers have nobody to be sent with.

Another dimension of the migration process is the migrants’ departure from Malta. Not all the migrants remain in Malta, although based on reports in the daily press, a rough estimate is that around 6,000 have remained. Sometimes the migrants’ departure from Malta takes place illegally. For instance, some migrants have left Malta on a regular visa and then overstayed in the country they arrived at. Others are believed to have left in much the same way as they have come to Malta, for instance, by “taking a boat” to Sicily. In some cases, minors have taken these routes. Having said this, sometimes migrants leave Malta through legal routes, although in most cases, they would be 18 years of age, an exception being if they would be reunited with family members abroad. Some
of the adult migrants have participated in resettlement programs (whenever available) to other parts of Europe or, sometimes, the United States. Others have participated in assisted voluntary return programs to their countries of origin. Others have been deported, particularly, if their country-of-origin was willing to take them back and was recognized under Maltese legislation as a “safe country” to which they could be sent back, on the Maltese government’s insistence.

The particular situation in which unaccompanied minor asylum-seekers in Malta thereby find themselves contributes to the ethnographic interest of this article as it allows for an empirical exploration about the influence of national borders upon life projects. The legal category unaccompanied minor asylum-seekers is in itself a term worthy of scrutiny. The “legal” use of this term shows that the law constructs this category and defines the obligations that states have toward the children and young people who fall within it. This relates not only to the material reception conditions that it is expected that states provide but also to their obligations to uphold the migrants’ right to education and to access health care. Malta’s detention policies and procedures, however, have come under harsh criticism from human rights groups for being far too regimented and inhumane in comparison with those in certain other countries. This implies that in interning a migrant who has entered the country irregularly, Malta has responded by subjecting them to a marginalization which is not characterized by a “careless expulsion (that is likely to bring their governments under attack for human rights violations) but (by) a careful placing (of them) outside of the declared boundaries of the norm” (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr 2008, p. XXI). When it comes to children and young people, both the UNCRC and the United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty (UNJDL) lay down international standards relating specifically to their detention. Both prescribe that the detention of children should only take place as a last resort (Article 77b of the UNCRC and Rule 2 of the UNJDL). Due to the application of these standards, the unaccompanied minors provide a different challenge to borders and rules about who is included and excluded in Malta from other categories of asylum-seekers. In practical terms, they seem to have a “pass,” into Malta, that others, particularly, do not necessarily have.

Beyond the law, however, there is also an issue of how minor asylum-seekers are perceived by society at large. Do societies perceive them simply as a threat, as people who will burden their economies, particularly if they are characterized by a high unemployment rate or are unable to meet the needs of an increasingly ageing population adequately? Saying this, do host societies also recognize that had these children stayed on in their countries of origin, they were likely to encounter, (or else may have had encountered) child trafficking, bonded labor, and possibly child pornography or child prostitution. It is also likely that some others may have experienced, or knew people who experienced female genital mutilation, forced child marriage, and even sexual servitude based on socio-cultural and religious practices. The right to a family, to an education, and even to a home may be denied to them. All this is in addition to the physical and mental health needs which may have come about through the experiences in their home countries which originally led them to seek asylum or which led their parents to encourage them to do so (Burnett & Fassil, 2002).

Such different perspectives show how, by using the term unaccompanied minor asylum-seekers as the ethnographic focus of this study, one is also focusing on a pressing need for states to apply flexible substantive standards that are constructed in such a way as to be consistent with the best interests principle. Traditionally, unaccompanied minor seekers were seen as having been separated from both parents and who were not cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, was responsible to do so. More recently, it was observed that other people could care for them, particularly if there were strong community obligations in their countries of origin. This implies that they would not be totally “unaccompanied” even though they might still face the same risks as that category of unaccompanied children and young people who had absolutely nobody to care for them. Possibly in recognition of this, sometimes, in the literature, the term separated children has been used in the place of unaccompanied minors. This brings to mind that even if children and young people are separated from both parents or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, it is possible to give a wider and more open interpretation to whether they are being “cared for” (Villarreal, 2004). Placing this under an ethnographic lens, the distinction between the use of the terms unaccompanied minor asylum-seeker and separated child is one that is on a positioning level. Both are prominently placed in a discourse of transnationalism, a concept that has become increasingly central to how migration has come to be understood during the last decades, particularly since possibilities for travel have expanded and become more widely accessible (Brettell, 2000).

Method

The article uses an ethnographic approach, where ethnography is being seen as a “family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents” (Willis & Trondman, 2000, p. 1). In this article, ethnography is being used in a broad sense as it applies a mixed method approach through which to gain understanding of the migrants’ lives and aspirations, particularly once they are in Malta. It is purposely not simply focused on the migrants as immigrants to Europe. Emphasis is made on the changes that they experience as they negotiate different life events. Emphasis is also laid on the fact that culture (the object of anthropological enquiry) is constructed and understood precisely through their movement from place to place. This article thereby is constructed through means other than bounded research (Appadurai, 1996; Clifford, 1997).
Certain common themes that would be anticipated in ethnographic research on migration would include exploring how a journey begins, carries on, and ends; how during that journey knowledge is generated; how stories are told; how objects or things are gathered and dispersed while the journey is taking place; and what is retained as memorabilia, on its completion. Such broad themes also characterize this article, only they are presented in a way that simultaneously acknowledges that the migrants are in a state of transition in Malta, since, usually, they aspire to leave after some time. The focus of the article is on the experiences of the migrants, and thereby unlike other studies which focus more on exploring whether detention is necessary, whether it denigrates people’s human rights, or whether migrants “should” be shown respect, the study takes a relative more ‘positive science’ approach to such prescriptive understandings.

The need to clearly elicit the participants’ perspectives can be illustrated by using the notion of “habitable cars” of contemporary Western society as a point of reference. Laurier et al. (2008) note that so as to understand cars, one must not appreciate the car environment, “as such” (p. 18). Rather, one needs to focus on the space of the car, both internally and externally, that is, from the perspective of the route it is driven along. This “space” is essentially shaped by the relations and intentions of those inside it. To an ethnographer, it is almost as if the car is a “shared intentional space.”

In effect, ethnography offers a variety of ways of uncovering human subjectivities, especially in relating evolving personal aspirations to the different social and cultural contexts that migrants encounter. As a result, the challenge for social scientists is to remain sensitive to the different ways in which people engage with their ability to move from one country to another, and to understand more what this engagement means to young people. Beyond this, there is also a need, to reflect on the role played by barriers and obstacles to this process, and thereby to reflect on the nature of the factors that constrain people’s abilities to be mobile. Although this article focuses on the young people who have left Africa and come to Europe, there would be those who had not made it this far on the journey. Analysing this intersection played in the construction and comprehension of their worlds and reality. This was in acknowledgment that in Malta, it is fairly normal practice for young people to enter into formal and informal contexts where they could learn things. Complementary to this is that I believed that consolidating the interviews with English lessons would evidence to them that I wanted the best for them. I wanted to transmit the message that, just like the English lessons, the research would be directed at somehow making their lives, or those of the migrants who come after them, somehow ‘better’. In many respects, they share with Orellana, Thorne, Chee, and Lam’s (2001) study of immigrant children from Yemen, Korea, Mexico, and Central America living in Los Angeles and Oakland, the experience of “transnational childhoods” which is characterized by living daily life in such a way as to be inter-wrapped with experiences of migration and integration.

It is thereby impossible to see the residential homes simply as ‘places’ without also exploring how the participants exercise agency to forge their individual life projects. This implied that they also needed to be seen as conceptual ‘spaces’ - the boundaries of which are constructed inter-collaboratively by the ethnographer and the participants. (As a case in point, had I to have carried out a study with their smugglers, this would have most probably lead me to construct a very different account to the one that is presented in these pages.) In a nutshell, different researchers with different foci would be likely to produce a different ethnography from that which is presented in these pages.

So as to obtain the consent of the (minor) migrants who participated in this study to carry out this research, they were approached initially by the coordinators of the homes who asked them if they would like to take part, and who briefed them about its aims on my behalf. They were also informed that they would not suffer any negative repercussions if they opted out of participating and they were not obliged to answer any of the questions and were free to leave the interview at any time. After this introduction by the coordinators, I remained on-site for some time, explaining to them that I was remaining there specifically so as to enable them to ask me for any clarifications and further explanations. More than 80% of those approached consented to participate. They were subsequently interviewed.

Twelve of the participants are males and the remainder are females. The interviews that were carried out each lasted for around 45 min each, although some lasted slightly longer, and some were of a shorter duration. This was mainly due to the language issue, some spoke better English than others, and were consequently able to express themselves at greater length than others. The participants came from Somalia (10 participants), Eritrea (four participants), and Ethiopia (three
participants). The remaining three participants came from the West African countries of the Ivory Coast and Mali, and another came from Nigeria. The Nigerian spoke English fluently, and even though none of the others came from English-speaking countries, the majority could communicate in English in such a manner that they could be clearly understood. Some of the participants had left their countries of origin some time back, sometimes living in other parts of Africa, and sometimes traveling as far afield as South Africa to try to build a future there.

“Here Is Here” and “There Is There”

One of the participants, Abu Bakr, said that he was 17, even though he looked older. He escaped from Somalia after a warlord attacked their home village, killing all of his relatives. He mentioned his fear that he would be forced to take upon the role of a soldier had he to stay on, and an associated fear that, if he did not comply, he would be killed. He explained that, subsequent to the death of his loved ones, he was sent to Europe, by an uncle, who paid for his journey. His original aspiration was to reach Italy and then somehow reach the United Kingdom, where he had friends whom he believed would “help him,” even though he was unsure how he could get there. He explained that he ended up in Malta instead of Italy because his boat ran into difficulties when at sea. Subsequently, after being sighted by a passing vessel which must have alerted the authorities, he was transferred onto an army boat and brought to Malta.

Migration inherently means leaving one place and arriving at another, and in Abu Bakr’s case this meant leaving Somalia and coming to Malta. However, the two places were seen as diametrically different. Abu Bakr explained himself as follows:

There is one thing you must understand. Over there, in Africa, life is one way. Over here, life in Europe is another. They are not the same. Here is here and there is there. Over there, I wake up in the morning and I ask where is Muhammad. They tell me Muhammad has been shot, he is dead. I ask where is Amir. They tell me Amir has been shot. He is dead. Then the war-lords come for you. You have to shoot people. Or else they will shoot you. There is no peace. There is no future there. Neither is there a present. There is only one way, that is out. Leave the country. And out I am . . . Now, the question remains, where in Europe, will I settle long-term?

The contrast between the two “lives” (in Africa and in Europe) may offer insight into why transnational networks that enable people to depart from Africa and come to Europe operate. Even though smugglers provide migrants with small, often unseaworthy vessels, for at least at some part of the journey, and migrants are conscious that they are risking their lives by traveling in this manner, this type of ‘transportation’ has become a fully fledged commercially viable operation. This can be also judged by the fact that so many boatloads leave Africa from Europe. Having said this, people do not flee their countries simply because the possibility for travel, in some form, exists. Rather, a number of interconnected factors come into play including the migrants’ underlying motives for leaving their countries of origin. Abu Bakr said that in Europe he saw “stability.” In his words, “I want to find a homeland and not live the rest of my life like a nomad.” In terms of the life projects that Abu Bakr was constructing, this inferred that he was constructing an identity from the discourses available in his own cultural contexts. Although remaining in Africa perhaps did not necessarily infer that he would have had to live his life like a nomad, it is likely that he selected this interpretation over that which could stem from other competing discourses. Wetherell and Potter (1992) point out that an individual’s identity is not consistent, and, at times, may even be contradictory. As they point out, “everybody is a dilematician” (p. 198).

Ethnographers might experience difficulty in leaving their own paradigmatic worldview to fully comprehend the meaning of stability to Abu Bakr and to co-construct their stories with them so as to retell them accurately. Indeed, there are different types of stability, and the reference of an ethnographer is to that of his or her own world. Usually, any other world is interpreted with the known world in mind as a reference. This is even though post-modern notions of language and self have made it more likely for ethnographers to access new perspectives to reality, by enabling a flexible inter-play of different subjective positions as they de-construct reality so as to create different understandings of lived experience. Abu Bakr’s noting that “here is here and there is there” is intended to denote that he feels safer in Europe than in Africa in a very concrete manner. This implies that such aspects of stability that may come to readers’ minds, such as that associated with having a steady job, of living with a steady partner, or of owning one’s own property, is somewhat removed from the security that Abu Bakr is referring to. Abu Bakr is alluding, rather, to the importance of political stability and the presence of peace (as characterized by the absence of war). In virtue of this, to fruitfully reconstruct what Abu Bakr is saying, ethnographic studies would need to reflect the ideas put forward in Bronislaw Malinowski’s (1922) ground-breaking Argonauts of the Western Pacific, which defined the goal of ethnographic study as being, “to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world” by “plung[ing] into the life of the natives” for a reasonable (usually, one that is extended) period of time (p. 25).

Restriction and Space

Abu Bakr’s distinction between “here” and “there” also illustrates an important theme, namely, that of the restriction that he had experienced in Africa and the space he is experiencing (and creating) now that he is in Malta. His reference however is not to Malta but to Europe and while he is saying...
that he does not want to live his life as a nomad, he also clearly plans to move elsewhere in Europe. In many ways, he is sharing a distinction between the nation (Malta) and the larger state which it is believed to form part of (Europe). However, by seeing himself in Europe, this distinction is somewhat blurred. He is thereby bringing home the point that to effectively retell his story, it is important that ethnographers engage in a critical reflection about those aspects of definitions of the political that fail to acknowledge the part that the state plays in generating discourse that influences the everyday lives of its own citizens (Wilson & Donnan, 1998).

Failing this, ethnographers would not take into account the particular fluidity with which Malta is being associated with Europe. The manner in which Abu Bakr is depicting Malta is similar to that in which it is experienced by EU citizens, yet he does not hold such citizenship.

Abu Bakr is also effectively showing that even if ethnographers have never lived in a war-zone and cannot identify with the challenges this brings, they cannot understand the particular complexity of his situation by focusing on his particular discourse only. Rather, they need to see people’s realities from a wider socio-political perspective. For instance, one of the things that can be discerned from what Abu Bakr is saying is that he feels safer to talk about certain things now that he is in Europe than he would have had he been in Africa. It is likely that he would also act differently here than he would there. This implies that, as can be clearly seen in this article, ethnographers do not only play an active part in encouraging participants to speak out (mainly, by making their participants feel safe enough to disclose to them) but also play an equally as active part in conveying political messages, when retelling the stories.

Another illustration of the tension between restriction and space was provided by another migrant, Amira, who was a transsexual, who came originally from one of the countries in the Horn of Africa. She said that although biologically she was a male, she had known “since early childhood, that I am a female and I want to live my life as a woman.” Almost 18 years of age, speaking perfect English, she observed that had she been in Africa and she dressed and behaved in the feminine way she did in Malta, she would have been killed.

She said that she had been in Malta for around 6 years and noted that although being an asylum-seeker is difficult and restrictive (as was the case, both physically when she was detained, or emotionally, when her motives were questioned), in Malta, she had gained a sense of space that allowed her to be her true self and was now looking forward to carrying out gender reassignment surgery sometime in the future.

Linking this to her past, she also said that “a person must use effort and energy since being able to talk to others, about deeply personal things, is not something that comes easy to a person who has been through what I have been through.” On asking her what was the most difficult thing that she could talk about, she said that it was the journey to Malta from where she had first started out in Africa. On asking her again why this was so, she replied, “pain . . . oh . . . hunger, thirst, . . . people dying . . . oh, pain.” The perspective that Amira adopted was flexible enough to see herself as restricted in Africa and freer in Malta, and therefore in a better position to be her true self. However, it is still clearly rooted in narratives of desperation, first, as a child where she could not be a girl, and then, on making the journey to Malta, where she sees herself as powerless to stop her own or other people’s pain. As Wetherell and Potter (1992) point out, “identity is not formed from scratch every time a person speaks” (pp. 78-79). Rather, “over time particular routines, repetitions, procedures and modes of practice build up to form personal style, psycho-biography and life history, and become a guide for how to go on in the present” (Wetherell, 2007, p. 668). Often, unconsciously they drive people to re-enact earlier, possibly repressed, childhood experiences in later life.

**The Journey to Malta**

All the participants who spoke about fleeing from Africa said that they had started out in the same way. They first passed through different parts of Africa and the Sahara desert to eventually reach Libya’s shoreline. This was large enough to enable them, in many cases, to avoid detection. Some made it ashore and others did not. One of the participants, Abdi, who was a young man from Eritrea, explained that when he was on the jeep traveling through the desert, “someone jumped off, and stayed running round and round in circles, laughing, and screaming. He had gone mad. The jeep driver simply drove off.” After crossing the desert, they then crossed the Mediterranean Sea to Europe by boat.

In their interviews, Maria, who was 16 years old at the time of interviewing, and who was a Coptic Christian young lady from Eritrea, referred to “the great fear that we felt,” when on the boats. She said, “if ever I had ever believed in God, I believed in God then, like the other people who were with me, we were all so afraid,” “I did not know if I would live, I was frightened I would die,” “we all feared for the baby on board, since I was almost certain that he would die, its mother could not surely breast feed it properly,” “I was scared that the boat would capsize,” “I was scared that nobody would find us, we were hopelessly lost,” and “all of us were wet, very wet, and that unfamiliar feeling of being wet made me feel even more afraid.” Just as in Abdi’s case, Maria’s narratives appear to be characterized by fear. Two of the other participants, who explained that they were on the same boat that Maria was, said things like “I could not choose the boat I went on, when I was near the boat, I was almost pushed on.” “The people near the boats took my money and pushed me on board.” One person also described the condition of the boat or dinghy to which they were assigned to travel across the Mediterranean Sea in as “something that depends as much on luck as it does on the type of weather that you encounter during the crossing.”
According to the migrants, the fees that Africans pay for the sea journey are far higher than those that are imposed for crossing the desert even though the desert crossing is far longer. On asking the participants why they believed there was this disparity in relative prices, one said that

once you are in Libya and you want to make the crossing to Europe you would want to pay the world for it. The people on the boats (the smugglers) know this and this is why they charge so much more.

The migrants did not mention that the smugglers possibly faced higher risks when traveling at sea, as there was nowhere where they could hide if spotted. This can be attributed to the fact that it was unlikely that concerns about the smugglers would have been on the migrants’ minds. The participants said that they had paid agents around US$1,500 to cross the Mediterranean. The desert journey rarely exceeded US$500 and some said that it costs even less (around US$300). However, as one of the migrants pointed out, “there are no standard fares for these things.”

Malta’s Detention Policy

On arrival in Malta, all the participants said that they had spent some time in detention. However, some were detained only for a few hours, some for a few days, and others for several weeks prior to being released and assigned to the shelters for unaccompanied minor asylum-seekers. All the participants described detention as “a negative experience,” because they were locked up in a small area with a lot of other people, and as one participant, Mohammed, who was from Somalia, put it, “Even though I was detained for a short time, during that time, I lacked the space that allowed me to be my own true self and this was going to send me crazy, plain crazy.” This notion of space as opposed to restriction, that has also been referred to by Abu Bakr and Amira when comparing life in Africa with life in Europe, and when traveling by boat to Europe, has taken a slightly different twist. Now, Mohammed is referring to physical confinement for, possibly, a long stretch of time. For his release, he depends entirely on others, and he cannot exercise personal agency to obtain it.

Mohammed explained that both while in detention, and now, that he was out of detention, what was important to him was being with like-minded others. To him, this was a source of “comfort.” Presenting a narrative somewhat similar to that of Abu Bakr, he said that he had “run away from the country so as not to be forced to join the army.” He said “the last thing I want to do is kill someone.” Looking back at his time in detention, he said that the suffering associated with being there was somewhat alleviated by his having met like-minded others from his own country. He said that he was “astonished” to see some of the people who had also absconded, or who had helped their sons to abscond from the country, never expecting them to have done so because in Somalia they were seen as “important people.”

This need for people to be understood and validated by others, particularly if they are suffering, in some way, or experiencing uncertainty, is not particular to this study. A case in point is Farmer’s (1994) ethnographic study of people who had been diagnosed with AIDS. Farmer showed how narratives that are built upon the sharing of similar fears and aspirations are usually used by groups of people across time. In this way, they empower themselves to develop a shared understanding of experience. Nevertheless, Mohammed’s fear that had he to stay in detention for a long time, he would “go crazy” cannot be taken lightly. In a study that was carried out among “irregular immigrants” in Malta, 5% of whom were current detainees, it was found that the incidence of mental illness among African migrants in Malta was more than 12 times higher than it is among the Maltese, and the long stay in detention to which particularly older adults are subjected could be a contributory factor (Chetcuti, 2012).

Open and Closed Centers

So as to distinguish between detention where asylum-seekers are held on arrival in Malta and the shelters in the community where they are accommodated on leaving detention, the terms closed centers and open centers have been coined by the Maltese authorities. They are also used in the everyday discourse of the migrants. The closed centers are the detention shelters. The open shelters include not only the two shelters where the participants have been living while this study was carried out but also a myriad of other facilities that are provided for older asylum-seekers in Malta.

The only rules in force within open centers are the administrative ones which enable residents to live together in a community setting. However, the term open center is a paradox, particularly among younger migrants. Although, on the one hand, these (open) centres are seen as a marker that they have now achieved the freedom from all the previous restrictions, including those imposed through their detention, they are also a reminder to the migrants that they are unlike most other people their age who live in Malta. Although the migrants are not legally constrained to live in any of the centres that the Maltese government has set up for migrants from asylum-seeking backgrounds, in most cases, minor migrants would usually not have an option where to live, at least, until they start working, and can afford renting a place or finding some form of alternative accommodation. Having said this, they are obliged to leave the shelters for minors on turning 18. They have the option to then live at one of the adult open centers, if they are unable (or unwilling) to live elsewhere.

When at the open centers, the participants explained that one of the first difficulties they had to overcome was learning how to cope. They were alone, they were in a foreign country, they lived with Africans who did not necessarily speak
their language or share a similar religion, and they had to learn to relate to Maltese people, some of whom were hostile toward them, as they were Black while the majority of the Maltese were White. Abu Bakr explained, however, how, with support, he could overcome many of these difficulties. He mentioned two sources of support. The first source of support that he mentioned was the other minors who came from his country or in some cases, had the same tribal roots. He explained that their similar experiences and sharing a common language made it fairly easy for them to understand one another. In effect, relationships of the type that Abu Bakr is describing are usually based on the minors’ ability to construct and develop a socio-centric position wherein people are interested in each other’s welfare and invest in cooperation and trust (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993). The second source of support that Abu-Bakr mentioned was the members of staff at the open centres and the other (generally Maltese) people whom the migrants relate to when they attend sports clubs, entertainment venues, and so on. Temele, an Ethiopian (male) participant showed clearly that he needed the support of friends to forge his life projects.

When I went to the (residential) home, I knew I needed to move on. I needed to make friends. I needed to find a job. I said that the following year, perhaps, I would go to college. I knew that when I left the closed centre, I said that I had found freedom. I did, in a way. However, then, I had to look for greater freedom. I needed to be able to buy things, send money home, make plans for my future. I needed to live. I needed to show myself that I was a man, not a boy. I needed, in other words, to now discover freedom. Perhaps this is freedom, freedom does not mean simply leaving detention. I should never have been detained in the first place.

It is clear that friends are significant in the migrants’ lives, not only because they are young people where peer influence is significant but also because their own evolving life projects are framed in terms of their forming part of a community and reaching out to others to empower them further. To be a “man and not a boy” is not associated (by Temele) with a hegemonic masculinity but rather one that is associated with the liberty to make choices, and thereby of taking “possession of the realm of possibilities for mobility and building on it to develop personal projects” (Flamm & Kaufmann, 2006, p. 168) when eventually leaving Malta to forge his future.

**Daily Life in the Community**

The participants mentioned that apart from friends, they needed money, be this for reasons of survival, saving up to travel elsewhere, or even to send remittances home. They, therefore needed a job. In some cases, however, finding one was easier said than done. Amadou, who was from the Congo, explained that as he spoke little English, he found it difficult to find and hold down a job. He explained how, so far, he had been offered only “the jobs that nobody wants to do.” Very often, jobs of this nature are characterized by what Stalker (2001) calls “3-D tasks” (dirty, dangerous, and difficult). In effect, recent studies have concluded that (only) a minority of Maltese people (around 32%) believe that ethnic diversity contributes to the national culture, by enriching it (Pisani, 2011, 2012). However, such studies can be criticized as reifying the Maltese. In fact, other young people pointed out that the found satisfying jobs with pay comparable with that offered to the Maltese.

Naturally, every specific relationship between people needs to be seen within the context of “its embeddedness in the societal totality” (Castles & Miller, 2003, p. 8). For instance, in Malta, the migrants could also consider attending college so as to further their studies. They are enabled to attend college for free (Spiteri, 2012). However, once again this can also provide certain challenges including having to communicate in a new language, overcoming culture shock, possibly dealing with racism, and coming to terms with the different or little educational exposure (Hamilton, Anderson, Frater-Mathieson, Loewen, & Moore, 2000), as opposed to their Maltese counterparts.

**Conclusion**

This article has shown ethnographers need to have insights about the specific cultural rules relating to how people interact and react and who they can be, while noting the fluidity of these rules. This is because, researchers can only interpret their experience, knowledge, and interactions in the social world and relate them to the data presented by the participants (including migrants), if they are attuned to these different cultural meanings. The participants reference to here is here and there is there, shows, how, in retelling their stories, these young people’s different expectations of what life can offer them in the two contexts, merits clear exposition. In Malta, images of African identity construction (as Blacks, clandestini, and so on) and the impediments to social inclusion that result, may actually bring about discrimination (Shakespeare-Finch & Wickham, 2010). Locals promote impermeable national boundaries. In Africa, the Africans are simply Africans.

Having said this, depriving children and adolescents of their liberty and detaining them for administrative reasons, in Malta or elsewhere, is never likely to be in their best interests. It is most likely, that, it is, for this reason, widely seen as an unethical and unorthodox practice (Jureidini & Burnside, 2011). Added to this, the experience is not one that empowers individuals in any way. Mesfa, a 17-year-old young man from Ethiopia, had the following to say:

It is like when you are detained you do not know what you are going to find when you come out. It is so confusing. I was detained for two months. Some of the people there were only detained for a few days, if they believe that you are under 18, they release you. However, it is not all black. Every one in
Detention knows that they will come out. When we come out, we call it freedom. We know that we will have freedom. This gives us hope. The hope to keep on going.

Mesfa is speaking about two different things. On the one hand, he is speaking about feeling confused. On the other hand, he is speaking about “freedom,” “hope,” and “keeping on going.” In other words, on the one hand, he is speaking about powerlessness and vulnerability, and on the other hand, about endurance and resilience. Brettell (2002) advocates that such experiences need to be seen in a wider context of “global structures and national policies that influence immigration flow” and ensure that we all play a part in maintaining our identities as “acting, sentient human beings whose choices can influence structures and ultimately alter policies” (p. 431). This article has gone one step in this direction by showing that through co-creating and re-telling migrants’ stories, ethnographers can generate awareness and understanding, not only of the migrants’ particular plight but also of their prospective life projects and further aspirations for the future.

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