Reviewer's report

Title: An exploratory study of resilience among asylum seekers living with HIV

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Reviewer: James Okello

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This paper describes a crosssectional qualitative study of resilience among HIV positive asylum seekers attending HIV care in the UK. The authors conclude that resilience was tenuous and highlight three threats to resilience: loss of pre-migration resources, fear of external stigma associated with HIV and inability to influence asylum status as well as need for HIV treatment to stay alive. They conclude that UK government policies are regressive to asylum seekers even if they purport to reduce inequality and empower people.

This is an important paper for three reasons. First, it describes the firsthand accounts of the experience of living with HIV in resource rich country without knowing one’s fate as an asylum seeker and role of pre-migration stressors. The mental health of asylum seekers living with HIV is understudied and deserves more attention, and therefore the authors are to be commended for their valuable work in attempting to explore resilience factors in this context. Second, the paper attempts to tap into a highly debated issue; the concept of resilience, often measured in context of well-known adversities that are often absent in resource rich host countries such as UK. As the authors state in their conclusion; a less restrictive approach to asylum seekers may potentially reduce the mental and physical burden of being both and asylum seeker and HIV positive. Third, the authors delivered a clear, well-written manuscript, which is easy and interesting to read, subject to corrections.

Number guide:

Major Compulsory Revisions: 9,13,16,17
Minor Essential Revisions: 2,3,6,7,8,15
Discretionary Revisions: 1,4,5,10,11,12,14

I have a number of questions/comments that may improve the paper:

Title:
1. I suggest a more appropriate title would be: An exploratory study of resilience factors among asylum seekers living with HIV or Better: (given the emphasis the authors put on threats to resilience) An exploratory study of threats to resilience among asylum seekers living with HIV.

Abstract
2. Results: Based on the operational definition of ‘resilience’ adopted by the study (paragraph 5,last sentence) I would prefer that the authors use a more descriptive term other than making reference to resilience only as ‘tenuous’ and
to make specific reference to (all) resilience factors identified by the study, (for example access to HIV treatment) rather than threats to resilience only.

3. Conclusions: the conclusions appear redundant, do not reflect the essence of the paper and overemphasize the role of policies.

Background:

4) paragraph 3 The sentence beginning.. ‘The act of migration generates new stimuli and life as an asylum is shaped by new experiences’ is unclear to me and therefore how exactly it follows as pre-migration or posts migration ‘stressor’

5) In the fourth paragraph, I think most readers would know coming to the UK would increase the chances of one testing for HIV and that it would be difficult to estimate whether or not it was acquired pre or post migration. ; I would still consider having HIV as a ‘stressor’ (irrespective of the opportunities that come with it, such as the possibility of seeing a caring consultant) and not an ‘add on’ as is implied here.

6) paragraph 3 and 4: It is not entirely clear to me if this study focuses on the ‘ongoing’ role of pre-and post-migration stressors for those living with HIV or the independent role of living with HIV (as a stressor) as an asylum seeker. The study results appear to reflect the former rather than the latter.

7) Paragraph 4: sentence 6, 7 and 8 need to be tightened to avoid redundancy.

8) The three potential stressors here include: the delay in decision regarding the asylum status for those living with HIV, the event of and implications of an unsuccessful application, and living with HIV(or a positive HIV test result). From the authors’ operational definition of resilience…the ability to react positively when things go wrong. Which of these do they refer to?

Methods

9) Study design: Although it is understandable that HIV and asylum service providers’ inputs were important to guide the design of the study, it is not clear if the resilience or threats to resilience can be measured from the perspective of service providers, as has been referred in the results. The role of the service providers should be clearly defined and little or no reference made in the results section regarding resilience factors. On the other hand, if the intention of the authors was to measure what the service providers considered resilience factors, then this should be explicitly stated and differentiated, both in the results and discussion sections of this paper.

Data analysis:

10) In the second last sentence, the authors state that the participants had immense resourcefulness and coped remarkably well in difficult circumstances as the ‘reason’ for exploring resilience, which they refer to as tenuous. Why then do they go ahead to study resilience…as their ‘resilience’ was already obvious at that point?

Findings/ Results

11) I think the findings should be stated in a less firm way, for example the combined stress of seeking asylum and living with HIV appear to be
post-migration, and therefore reference to pre-migration factors as well as stigma and taboo regarding HIV ‘back home’ may play less of a role if they do not face this abroad.

12) As previously stated it is important to differentiate provider perspectives from those of HIV positive asylum seekers interviewed

Discussion

13. I think the originality of the study approach and methods should be stated in a less firm way, given the difficulty of differentiating what is pre, migration and post migration and the fact that resilience factors are not stated clearly in this study.

14. The study needs to highlight as a limitation the difficulty in delineating what constitutes resilience when contextual stressors are perceived rather than real, how coping is differentiated from resilience as well as the difficulty of collecting reliable data regarding HIV and asylum status.

15. With reference to UK asylum policies, the authors findings suggest that HIV seropositivity confers added risk, some reference should be made regarding the dual role of HIV and asylum seeking.

16. The conclusions focus on UK asylum policies, and need to remain focused on the results of the study and its implications if any for HIV positive asylum seekers. I would be in favor of a paragraph on the relationships among UK asylum policies and HIV in the Background/Introduction section and to leave this section to a more focused reference to conclusions drawn from the study findings.

17. Table 2 highlights stressors rather than the real focus of the study, which is resilience factors, which the authors actually measure but do not refer to, even in the discussion section. I would improve this table by adding both resilience and ‘threats’ to resilience factors.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.