

## Learning to live with discrimination: Experiences of two asylum seekers with misrecognition in Italy

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### Abstract

*Otherness is one issue that comes up when discussing migration, and when it comes to asylum seeking in Europe, the topic of discrimination is a pivotal one also due to the rise of nationalistic political parties in the last few years. This paper therefore uses narrative interviews and Axel Honneth's theory of recognition to explore the experiences of two asylum seekers with discrimination in Italy, and how they were responding to these experiences. The aim of the paper is to highlight how discrimination impacted differently on the participants' construction of self-identity and their different strategies when it comes to becoming part of the host society.*

**Keywords:** asylum seeking, discrimination, experiential learning, misrecognition

### Introduction

Before 2011, the major preoccupation of EU countries was to control undocumented migration but with the uprising in Tunisia, which started the Arab Spring, the discourse shifted from illegal or undocumented migrants to refugees and asylum seekers (Borri & Fontanari, 2017). The Tunisian situation forced many people to leave Tunisia and they headed towards Lampedusa in Italy. The EU and other European countries left Italy to deal with the problem alone. 'The Italian government decided to issue a six-month humanitarian document to all Tunisians stranded in Italy, which allowed them to freely move across the Schengen space. Many Tunisians headed to France' (Borri & Fontanari, 2017, p. 25). As a result, the French government closed its border with Italy and returned many refugees to Italy. On another front, the war in Libya in 2011, caused about 30000



people to leave. These persons also headed to Italy, and as in the Tunisian case, the EU and other countries left Italy to tackle the problem. In Italy, these refugees were not able to settle down; many of them were homeless, and after some time they moved to other parts of Europe. At this point, the refugee situation was still considered manageable, but the situation was aggravated with the Syrian civil war in 2013 and 2014 which made hundreds of thousands to head for Germany through Greece, Italy, Turkey and the Balkans. While some countries, like Macedonia and Greece, facilitated the movement of these refugees for example by providing special trains, some countries closed their borders. In fact, Hungary indicated its unwillingness to accept refugees. As the crisis was going, Germany decided to open its borders to Syrians.

The increase in the number of migrants into Europe has proved to be a political challenge to the countries of Europe (Androvičová & Bolečeková, 2019; Bartram et al., 2014; Castles, 2000, 2018; Karagiannis & Randeria, 2018). The governments of these countries have found this challenge difficult to handle. One of the reasons for this is the efforts by nationalists to make political gains from the issue of immigration. They do this by feeding on the suspicions and doubts of members of the host society by portraying migration as a challenge to national identity and cultural traditions and call for stricter immigration policies. The argument that immigration can lead to the erosion of cultural values, and thus a challenge to national identity has led to political conflicts in many European countries. Ultranationalist groups embark on campaigns to proclaim the dangers of migration. Some of the claims are: that a large number of asylum seekers refuse to return to their home countries after the rejection of their asylum application (Čáky, 2019); immigrants, particularly asylum seekers and refugees, are prone to criminality (De Coninck, 2020); the sheer number of foreigners can have a disintegrating effect on their society - migration is a threat to societal cohesion (Karagiannis & Randeria, 2018); the cultures of the host society and the migrants' society(ies) are fundamentally incompatible – for example, Muslim migrants in Europe are seen as a threat to European culture/civilisation (Bischoff, 2018; Karagiannis & Randeria, 2018). In Italy, some political parties with anti-immigration stance also sprang up, such as the Lega Nord and the Five Stars Movement. These parties claimed that Italy cannot accept all immigrants but promised to support projects that would tackle illegal migration from Africa, but these projects had to be situated in Africa and not Italy. Lega Nord went ahead to secure 17.63% in the 2018 parliamentary elections (Čáky, 2019).

There is no doubt that migration leads to some social transformations in the receiving society such as multilingualism and multiethnicity (Mecheril, 2018), and some of the concomitant challenges of immigration include the social inclusion or integration and participation of newcomers (Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2017; Formenti & Luraschi, 2020; Kurantowicz et al., 2014), and the desire to make them have a sense of belongingness because of the tendency by members of the receiving society to view immigrants as foreigners, or in some cases aliens. Bischoff (2018) notes that, 'Migration is always associated with Otherness, which in turn is seen as cultural difference, and usually also as inferiority' (p. 26). In order to tackle the challenge of othering, for many authors it seems important to acknowledge differences and celebrate diversity. However, this raises many questions and even paradoxes: Who is the 'other'? And how do we construct them. The other is that subject or person who is regarded as inferior based on certain characteristics. Such a person experiences barriers to their flourishing in the society. In essence, such a person's humanity is undermined and devalued. The definition of othering by Powell and Menéndez (2016) as 'a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities' (p. 17) shows that the other is constructed through

prejudice based on group identity. They point out that othering has many dimensions which include race, class, disability, sexual orientation, religion, among others.

The acknowledgment of differences and celebration of diversity might not always translate to positive experiences for migrants as it has been found out that in some societies, certain categories of immigrants (for example, those who are poor, those who lack legal permission to stay in the country, those who are under skilled, persons from certain countries or persons with different religious or ethnic backgrounds) are discriminated and live on the margins with poor opportunities for development if there are no intentional actions to counter discriminatory practices (Androvičová & Bolečeková, 2019; Portes, 2009). The question is: How does discrimination work for these migrants, notably for asylum seekers and refugees, who typically belong to the most marginalised categories (maybe not always, like the Ukrainian refugees who were received warmly by the countries of Europe)? The understanding of personal experiences and strategies can highlight the dynamics of discrimination and their consequences in terms of inclusion and well-being of migrants, but also for the ecosystemic wellbeing of the host society. Interpretative narrative inquiry can be a way to gain knowledge about the processes at micro, meso and macro levels.

This paper therefore aims to explore in depth how two asylum seekers from Nigeria have learned to cope with life in Italy. The questions I seek to elaborate in this paper include: What experiences of othering did these Black asylum seekers encounter in Italy and what coping strategies were they employing to address their experiences? Answering these questions provides new insights about how asylum seekers and refugees deal with experiences in the host society that are not only ‘unpleasant’ but threatening their sense of being human, their agency and their identity. In the remaining parts of this paper, I briefly discuss asylum seeking in Italy, the theory of recognition and analyse my interview materials followed by the discussion of findings.

## Asylum Seeking and Integration in Italy

Italy is a popular destination for immigrants who attempt to enter Europe via the Mediterranean (Bencivenga, 2017; Dovigo, 2019; Nuzzolese & Di Vella, 2008; Paynter, 2020) but this category of desperate migrants is portrayed as undesirable elements by the Italian media (Russo et al., 2016). It is the number four country with the highest number of asylum seekers (European Commission, 2022; European Council & Council of the European Union, 2022; European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022; Eurostat, 2022). In 2021, Italy received about 45,000 applications for asylum (European Commission, 2022). Asylum seekers are expected to make their application within 8 days of arrival in Italy. A decision is expected to be made on an asylum application within 30 days but in case of complicated circumstances, the whole process can take up to six months, and if the six months deadline is not met, there is a provision for a maximum of 18 months for each asylum application to be considered. If the application is accepted, asylum is granted and the asylum seeker becomes a refugee (Russo et al., 2016).

Although Caneva (2014) claims that integration in Italy is (narrowly) conceptualised in terms of economic insertion or participation in the labour market, Scardigno (2019) however contends that Italy complies with the European Union’s integration policy through actions to prioritise the active inclusion and participation of asylum seekers and refugees into the economic and social system by recognising the importance of access to education and granting recognition to qualifications acquired outside of Italy.

The procedures for the ‘integration’ of asylum seekers in Italy operate in three phases. The first phase entails rescue and identification. Identification is carried out by

fingerprinting and photographing the new arrivals. This happens immediately at the places of disembarkation, and it is coordinated by national authorities. This process is obligatory and hasty, and its meaning can be very obscure for the newcomer; most of them, for example, do not know about the Dublin Regulation and the fact that their pilgrimage towards asylum starts from there.

The second phase involves the accommodation of the newly arrived persons, and it is coordinated by local authorities. Accommodation can mean a lot for someone who had no appropriate clothes, food, water and medicine, and who had risked their life. However, this experience is also very hard: camps are overcrowded, poorly handled. Initial disorientation can be extreme. Food and ways of doing things are totally new and often unpleasant. Distributed accommodation in small apartments and residential centres have been dismantled in many places due to the new regulations (Formenti & Luraschi, 2020).

In the third phase, applicants for asylum and beneficiaries of asylum are involved in integration programmes such as language and vocational classes. These programmes are coordinated by municipalities and non-governmental organisations (European Social Policy Network, 2017; Ghio & Blangiardo, 2019). At each step of the process, the person is actively involved: even when they are storied as vulnerable or victims, or passive, the newcomers are attentive, strategic, more or less aware of what is going on, more or less sympathetic, demanding or dependent. Each has a story to tell, desires and hopes. So, beyond the procedure, we need to understand the process and the involved subjectivities.

The Italian situation appears overall very problematic when it comes to a real possibility for migrants' integration. I opine, based on my interviews, that while Italy has legal provisions to encourage the integration of asylum seekers and refugees into its society, these provisions do not seem to facilitate their sense of belonging. Dalziel and Piazzoli (2018) quote Catalano (2016) who paints a pessimistic picture of migrants' integration in Italy by declaring 'the systematic negative representation of migrants in Italy as a burden to Italian society' (Dalziel & Piazzoli, 2018, p. 9) that appears very reluctant to engage in any exchange or dialogue with immigrants, particularly refugees and asylum seekers. Paynter (2022) states that the widespread assumption that being economic migrants, Africans are not 'real' asylum seekers entails that they use up resources and provisions for real asylum seekers. Russo et al. (2016) assert that the media often depicts refugees and asylum seekers in derogatory terms. Venturini and Villosio (2018) also point out that foreigners in the Italian labour market are mostly concentrated in poorly paid and low-skilled jobs, even when they possess high qualifications. This reality is described as the 'racialisation' of knowledge (Bencivenga, 2017) or 'ethnicisation' of jobs (Venturini & Villosio, 2018) with the consequence that migrants' full potentials are not valued.

Furthermore, with the enactment of the law, n. 113/2018, otherwise known as Decreto Salvini, which abolished the category of 'Humanitarian Protection', asylum seekers in Italy are no longer entitled 'to receive integration support (e.g., work orientation services, legal and psychological support)' (Bianco & Cobo, 2019, p. 3; Formenti & Luraschi, 2020). This also means that there is no longer an obligation by reception centres to provide language classes to asylum seekers. However, the law, guarantees linguistic education to minors and those who have been granted asylum (Bianco & Cobo, 2019). Bianco and Cobo (2019) also describe Italy's integration practices as assimilative due to the emphasis on acquiring Italian language in order to obtain long-term residency and Italian citizenship. They however point out that this is a feature of the EU's integration policies. It implies that language teaching for migrants, including asylum seekers and refugees, in Italy and other European countries does not

consider the linguistic needs of specific persons but is focused on preparing them for the labour market.

## Learning and Migration

Kurantowicz et al. (2014) view ‘migration as a process of education and learning’ (p. 146). Morrice (2013) states that ‘Becoming a refugee involves significant learning’ (p. 267) because the individual has to learn new values, rules and behaviours. In the context of migration, (informal) learning may take place when people make sense of what they need and how to act in their new socio-cultural contexts. Most times, learning takes place as ‘social learning, distributed throughout the lifeworld; it proceeds through social interaction’ (Rogers, 2014, p. 41). Morrice (2011), drawing on Lave and Wenger (1991), posits that learning is a fundamental part of social interaction. Thus, as newcomers interact with members of their host society, they gain understanding of social practices, positions and roles. This explicates the connection between learning and identity. The understanding that a newcomer develops about social practices, positions and roles will contribute to how they position themselves in the host society and will determine how much they participate in it the new society.

Thunborg et al. (2021) used biographical interviews with five asylum seekers to explore how young adult asylum seekers in Sweden ‘learn to belong’ to their host society. They found out that some learned to be marginalised; some learned to be disconnected while others learned to be co-participants in the host society. This enlightens to us to the fact that a lot of learning that is not organised or conscious, or not desirable at all, is taking place in asylum seekers, and this kind of learning has the potential to shape the kind of self-identity asylum seekers construct and also how they perceive their host society. We can therefore conceptualise that self and identity are constructed through learning. This learning usually occurs during social encounters and interactions even in formal learning situations, and when it is integrated into a person’s biography, it can lead to a transformation in the person’s identity (Morrice, 2011), and as mentioned above concerning the study by Thunborg et al. (2021), learning is not always positive, as their study result shows that some asylum seekers learned to be marginalised or disconnected.

The type of learning explained in the preceding paragraphs can be described as experiential learning. Experiential learning is ‘the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience’ (D. A. Kolb, 1984, p. 41). Jacobs (1999) cited in Gross & Rutland (2017) describes experiential learning as the construction of knowledge from direct experiences. Thus, experience is central to learning from the perspective of experiential learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; D. A. Kolb, 1984, 2014). Kolb (1984) identifies three models of experiential learning: The Lewin’s Model, Dewey’s Model and Piaget’s Model. The Lewinian Model is described as a ‘model of action research and laboratory training’ (Kolb, 1984, p. 21). In the Lewinian Model, learning is seen regarded as an integrated process that involves here-and-now concrete experience and feedback. The here-and-now concrete experience entails identifying learning from personal experience and subjectivity in assigning meaning. Feedback refers to a problem-solving process encompassing assessing information received from observations and reflections in order to identify any departure from expected goals. The feedback received determines what happens next in the learning process.

Dewey’s model shares many similarities with Lewin’s model but according to Kolb (1984), Dewey makes ‘the developmental nature of learning [...] by describing how learning transforms the impulses, feelings and desires of concrete experience into higher-

order purposeful action' (p. 22). Dewey thus views learning as a process of integrating experience, observation and action. Piaget outlines four stages of cognitive growth from childhood to infancy. The first stage is the sensory-motor stage (0-2 years). The second stage is the representational stage (2-6 years). The third stage is the concrete operations stage (7-11 years). The fourth and final stage is the formal operations stage (starts between 12 and 15 years). The sensory-motor stage is characterised by learning through feeling, touching and handling. In the representational stage, the child starts to manipulate objects as they develop their ability for reflection. In the concrete operations stage, the child's capacity for abstract and inductive reasoning starts to develop. In the formal operations stage which starts with the arrival of adolescence, the individual is able to carry out hypothetico-deductive reasoning and test their theories.

Kolb and Kolb (2005, p. 194) and D. A. Kolb (1984, pp. 26-38) identify six propositions on which the theory of experiential learning is predicated:

- (a) Learning is best conceived as a process
- (b) All learning is relearning
- (c) Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world
- (d) Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world
- (e) Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment
- (f) Learning is the process of creating knowledge

The theory of experiential learning has given rise to a number of programmes or learning designs or teaching styles such as industrial trainings, internships, role plays, field trips, games, simulation tasks, case studies, etc. (Bélanger, 2011; Gross & Kelman, 2017). While these learning designs, which entail planned and active engagement with the learning process, have taken the spotlight, experiential learning also accounts for learning that takes place from unplanned experiences and reflection on such experiences, which is the focus of this article. The approach in this paper is that experiential learning refers to insights that the research participants developed as a result of their experiences. How did their experiences of certain encounters shape their attitudes and actions? These experiences could be from formal education contexts or informal day-to-day contexts. Bélanger (2011) states that reflexivity is important for experiential learning to take place. Thus, experiential learning involves subjectivity and reflection. The individual reflects on their experience and from their reflection, they develop new knowledge or attitude or course of action in relation to a particular situation (Dervin, 2017; Weiland, 1981). Bélanger (2011) points out that not all experience leads to learning, rather learning takes place only when the individual has reflected on and transformed their experience into new knowledge that will be useful in the future.

In the latter part of this paper, I will show how my participants learned to cope with discrimination and racism, and how their strategies affected the construction of a migrant's identity. The focus of this paper is on experiential learning in any context, including formal education contexts.

## **The Contribution of the Theory of Recognition to Self-Identity**

Axel Honneth's theory (Honneth, 1995) explains that intersubjective recognition shapes how people build their self-identity. When a person receives recognition from other people, the person develops a healthy sense of self. Intersubjective recognition is

manifested in three spheres (Fleming, 2011b, 2011a; Fleming & Finnegan, 2014a, 2014b; Honneth, 1995; West, 2014; West et al., 2013).

The first sphere, love, is characterised by subjects' dependence on each other; encouragement or affective approval are important. Essentially, individuals recognise each other as needy creatures and feel accepted by the other person when their needs are satisfied. Honneth claims that the sphere of love is 'both conceptually and genetically prior to every other form of reciprocal recognition' (Honneth, 1995, p. 107) because it is in this sphere of recognition that individuals develop basic self-confidence.

The second sphere of recognition refers 'only to the situation in which self and other respect each other as legal subjects for the sole reason that they are both aware of the social norms by which rights and duties are distributed in their community' (Honneth, 1995, pp. 108–109). People should be seen as morally responsible persons with rights and capability to participate in societal affairs. The ability to exercise one's rights is what develops an individual's self-respect because it empowers the individual who bears rights to 'engage in action that can be perceived by interaction partners' (Honneth, 1995, p. 120).

The third sphere of recognition, social esteem, concerns the full manifestation of a person's traits and abilities. When an individual's uniqueness and contribution to society are recognised, Honneth (1995) points out that such recognition helps the individual to develop their self-esteem.

When a person is denied recognition, their self-identity is injured (Honneth, 1995). This underscores how humans need recognition from others in order to develop healthy self-identity. Honneth locates misrecognition or disrespect in the three spheres of recognition. He argues that social or structural exclusion of persons is misrecognition (disrespect) in the sphere of rights, and damages a person's self-respect. Experiences of misrecognition can lead to a struggle for recognition whereby individuals seek redress for their situation. Honneth's attempt in developing the theory of recognition is to advance the concept of the 'ethical life'. This concept of ethical life, according to him, refers to all the conditions that are necessary for an individual to develop a good self-identity. The ethical life can be identified in 'a society in which the universalistic achievements of equality and individualism would be so embedded in patterns of interaction that all subjects would be recognized as both autonomous and individuated, equal and particular persons' (Honneth, 1995, p. 175). So, the ethical society is the society where conditions for self-realisation for everyone are present.

Some adult education scholars have written about the place of recognition in adult learning. In his theoretical reflection on the Fraser-Honneth debate, Huttunen (Huttunen, 2007) states that the task of adult education is to promote a society where love, caring and reciprocal recognition exist, allowing everyone to be able to develop a healthy relation to self and work towards self-realisation and flourishing. He thus advocates for spaces where people can experience love, care and respect in order to develop a healthy self-esteem. West (2014) shows how care and concern shown by significant others can contribute to an individual's self-development. He demonstrated how the feeling of being seen and valued by others, through the forging of caring relationships can help a person to overcome self-doubts, gain self-confidence and become more agentic. West et al. (2013) also argue that acceptance by others can enhance students' self-confidence while the feeling of being granted the status of a student with the same rights as other students can improve a person's self-respect. Sandberg and Kubiak (2013) explored the place of Honneth's recognition theory in the processes and practices of *recognition of prior learning* (RPL) by studying the experiences of paraprofessional workers in health and social care in the UK and Sweden. They claim that by making all learning experiences

(including non-formal and informal) visible and recognised, RPL can improve self-awareness, self-confidence and self-esteem. Thus, RPL has the potential to contribute to a person's healthy self-identity (Sandberg & Kubiak, 2013).

## Methodology and Context

In this study, I adopted a narrative method in which narratives were provoked, then analysed and interpreted in order to arrive at a deep and critical understanding (Bochner & Herrmann, 2020). The narrative interview provides rich materials about the experiences of participants, or better put, their narrative construction of experience, because they are able to talk about what is most important to them without being stopped. Throughout the study, I tried to take into account that when telling their stories, participants choose what to reveal and what to omit due to some reasons (Bochner & Herrmann, 2020; Formenti, 2014; West, 1996). Part of the reasons include: the sentiments attached to the story being told, for instance, if the story brings back pleasant or painful memories (West, 1996); besides, the interview context shapes the interviewee's narrative (Galimberti, 2014). That is, the interviews I held were co-constructions of reality between the participants and myself (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 1989, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 2003, 2013). Another important point to take into consideration is that stories tell much more than what appears at their surface, and they do not explain themselves alone. This is why the interpretation of participants' narratives is crucial (Merrill & West, 2009) The interpretation was subjective since I interpreted the narratives through my experiences – not least, my own status as a Nigerian PhD student in Italy – and what I thought the participants were communicating (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

I transcribed the interviews in full and I made no attempt to make the participants' expressions grammatically correct. Three dots indicate pauses while shortened speech are indicated by four dots. Italics were used when the participant was reporting someone else's speech. Words in parentheses are my explanations of non-English words. Quotations in Nigerian Pidgin English were translated. Bold font was used to indicate my words or the questions I asked. Participants' names have been anonymised for confidentiality. Being a qualitative study, this research does not aim at representativeness or generalisation but at 'resonance, plausibility, moral persuasiveness and explanatory power' (West, 1996).

The analysis in this paper did not start when I started writing the paper. It started immediately after my first interview for my PhD project. Thus, it was recursive. While returning from each of my interviews, I would think about what I had heard, and try to make sense of it. After extensive careful considerations of the transcripts, I identified themes that ran across all my interviews. I then went ahead to create categories for emerging themes in the stories. I found similar categories in the stories of the two participants selected for this paper. I found in the participant's stories that they were learning how that they were learning that misrecognition was part of their reality as black asylum seekers in Italy. Their stories also revealed how they were learning to respond to these experiences of misrecognition.

## *Participants*

For my whole project, I interviewed ten (10) asylum seekers/refugees, three (3) CPIA teachers, one (1) social worker who is Italian, one (1) camp operator who is Nigerian and one (1) other person who is the president of the association of Nigerians in Milan. In this paper, the narratives of two asylum seekers are presented in this paper because their

interviews revealed instances of discrimination and their strategies for coping with these experiences. The participants were asylum seekers from Nigeria. They were both living in the Lombardy region of Italy. My interviews with the participants took place in Standard English and Nigerian Pidgin English. Nigerian Pidgin English is a blend of English words and local words from Nigerian languages, so most people in Nigeria, regardless of their educational status, can speak Pidgin English. The participants and I switched between Standard English and Pidgin English throughout the interviews. It is important to point out that while speaking standard English, their statements were most times not grammatically correct, but they are presented verbatim in order to preserve their voice. Below are short portraits of the participants.

## Analysis

### Steve

Steve, who was in his late twenties, came to Italy in May 2017. He arrived in the South of Italy and was later transferred to Lombardy. His immediate goals after arriving in Italy were to get a job by the end of 2017 and learn the language. His motivation to learn Italian was fuelled by the need to get a job and to communicate with people. He got a job before the end of 2017 and since then he had been combining schooling and working. While in middle school, he and one of his teachers, a White Italian lady, started a romantic relationship. He was working as a security guard at the time of the interview. Apart from his regular job as a security guard, he also worked as a mediator/interpreter for other Nigerians because of his ability to speak Italian. I interviewed Steve in a public park in company of his girlfriend. The interview lasted for almost two hours. Steve felt that while life for a Black person in Italy was difficult, things were more difficult for asylum seekers from Nigeria.

### Charles

Charles was in his mid-twenties and he came to Italy in 2016. After the success of his asylum application, he went to Belgium. He came back to Italy because of a particular document he needed, and planned to return to Belgium as soon as he got the document. He had found it difficult to get a satisfactory job since he returned to Italy. At the time of the interview, he was working with a food delivery company, where he delivered food using his bicycle. I interviewed Charles in his house. The interview lasted for one hour. Throughout the interview, he was critical about life in Italy. He alleged that Italy was the most racist country in Europe. He expressed the view that Italy was a difficult place for Black people to live.

## *Encounters with discrimination*

Both Steve and Charles recounted experiences of discrimination in Italy. Their accounts reveal that discrimination exists in different segments of the society in Lombardy, Italy. For example, formal learning environments, workplace and government institutions. Steve narrated some experiences of discrimination he had in language class and in middle school. He remembered a particular teacher in middle school who used racial slurs when students argued with her. He also recalled that he was stereotyped by a particular teacher in language class:

.... And then when I got there... I got into class the very first day, what the teacher... the first thing the teacher asked me was “*Where are you from?*” and I said Nigeria, and she said, “*Okay. You can sit in the very last seat in the class.*”

Because you were a Nigerian?

Yeah, because, “*I know after a few months you will run away like every other Nigerian.*” I said, “*Okay*” and I stayed there for... from October till January. In January, I had the exam, the final exams and I scored 92/97. I came out as the best student in the class and she was like “*No, no, I didn’t expect this from you, above all you are a Nigerian.*” And I said, “*Yes, that reminds me of what you said to me the very first day, and that’s part of my determination.*” She said, “*No, no, I never said anything like that.*” I said “*Okay, maybe there was a little bit of misunderstanding but this is what I understood at first*” and she said “*No, no, I’m sorry if you understood that.*” And that was it. So, she asked me to continue studying, like she sees that I’m a very bright person. So, I should go forward and she helped me fill the entrance form for the scuola media (middle school).

Steve stated that such an experience could be discouraging for students. His narration shows discrimination in a place where migrants should find hope. Formenti and West (2018) suggest that educators should create environments where learners feel valued. The territorial centres of adult education have immigrants as the majority of their students, and one would expect persons who work with migrants to be circumspect in relating with this category of people. The language teacher’s action reported by Steve is a typical example of othering: a categorisation of the other based on his origin. It is racist. Eschenbacher (2020) suggests that educators who work with migrants should adopt a supportive attitude and Wildemeersch (2017) urges educators to show respect for migrant learners. However, we must understand that these processes are not rationally implemented or chosen, and most teachers in these centres do not perceive themselves as racist (Oshodi, 2021).

Steve also narrated that he had experienced and witnessed discrimination on the street and in the workplace. He said Italians would hold their bags and wallets tight when they saw him. He also narrated that in the supermarket where he worked as a security guard, his boss would tell him to keep an eye on Black people who came to shop and that despite expressing his displeasure at what he considered racism, the situation persisted. He found himself in a quandary: if he refused to follow his boss’ orders, it would appear that he was slacking in his duties, and to focus his gaze on Black shoppers was psychologically disturbing for him:

.... Where I dey now wok, we dey use am get problem well well for there. Bikos I dey tell my capo go say, “If na so una tek dey wok here, me I no fit dey do am bikos dis one dey affect me personally and psychologically. How you go see guys, bikos sey dem be Africans, dey just enta here una begin follow dem up and down? Then you now as a capo, you dey call me sey mek I dey follow dem up and down....”

(Translation): Where I work now, this has caused problems a lot because I tell my boss that, “If this is how you di here, I can’t join you to do it because it affects me personally and psychologically. Why will you be monitoring people because they are Africans? Then, you are also asking me to follow them around” (Author’s own translation).

I: Dem dey call too?

S: Yes now. By di time I no do dat one wey you dey tell me, e go kon be like sey I no know how to do my job. Whereas na you dey impose your racism put for my bodi

(Translation): Yes. If I don't do what you tell me, it will look as if I can't do my job but the fact is that you are forcing me to be racist (Author's own translation).

To do it against my fellow people

Yeah, against my will. Na hin I kon tel sey, "If me I no dey wok for here, by di time I enta here, na di same tin. So, me, personally, I no fit do dis kain wok." E say, no, no, no mek I no worry sey dem go resolve am, dem go resolve am. Little, little, maybe a day or two, e go still change but di third day, di same tin go still happen.

(Translation): Yes, against my will. That is why I told him that, "If I didn't work here and I entered this place, you would do the same thing to me. I can't do this type of work." He said, no and asked me not to worry as they would resolve the situation. There would be a change for maybe a day or two but by the third day, the same thing will repeat itself.

In the extract above, Charles recounted how his boss' order was making him act against his will, and despite his protestations, the situation did not change. He narrated that he was always at loggerheads with his boss because of his opposition to be asked to monitor Black shoppers.

While Charles commented that he had not experienced discrimination in language class, he however claimed that racism was rife in Italy. Charles argued that racism was a systemic issue in Italy:

Italy is a country whereby, definitely, the way they treat Black are not the same way they treat White. Italy... I can say some of part... let me not use this word. Some part of Italy... maybe... I've never seen a Black man driving a public bus in Italy. I've never seen a Black man driving train in Italy. So... but in other country where I have step my foot, I've seen a Black man working but they discriminate a lot. Italy is the most racist country in Europe.

But about racism, yeah, I could say Italy is the most racist country. I'm not saying it because... because... I'm not saying it because I'm in Italy. Errr... I said it because I have travelled. I have the experience. If I've not travelled, I've travel almost getting to four to five countries in Europe. I got the experience. I have it. I see it. I see it. Let me use an example of this now: In Italy, in Italy, in Milano here, you find... find it difficult to give a Black man a house, to rent. I've went for a place to look for a house, and the woman told me wholeheartedly... I cannot remember the place again, somewhere in Monza. Ooh (hisses). I told my commercialista the day he came to register me about this thing, emergency something. I told him the woman told me, "*As far as you are a Black man, I can't give you my house to rent. I can't give you.*" But few... some of them are good o. some of Italians are good. Some of Italians are good. You can't say bad of everybody. As far... even some Blacks are bad. Some Whites are bad... some Whites are bad too. You cannot just say everybodies are good, no. You cannot say everybodies are good, no. Some of them are good. Some of them are bad. But when you meet the bad person, that's your bad experience. So, when you meet a good person, that's your good experience, a good part of it. So, that is it. That is it.

Charles contended that Black persons experienced a lot of suffering and discrimination in Italy. He also suggested that there was a stereotyping of Blacks.

...I went to questura (the immigration desk at the police station) here in Lecco one day. I saw many Black crying, frustrating. I went to interpret one... for one guy. They are crying. All their requirement they need is there but what is the problem? Why did they not give them what they need? That's the question. Because a Black man. A White man can see you, you are standing with a White man... errr... as a Black man, a White man can see you are standing with a White man, they will first of all choose a White man before you. It happened to me when I went to interpret something for this boy here. They will choose a White man.

You came before him o. They say no discrimination. A controller will see you inside train. A controller will see you inside train. He will leave the White man and come and control you as a Black ma because you are sitting there. “*Bolieto, bolieto*” (train ticket) (laughs loudly). My God! Yeee! Black man don suffer. “*Bolieto.*” I’m not saying this because I want to... That is my experience. I have experienced it severally. He will leave the White guys there and come and control you as a Black man.

Charles described how Black persons are stereotyped as wanting to avoid paying for transportation and are thus subjected to extra scrutiny on the train. The experience of stereotyping is evident in the narratives of both Steve and Charles. The tendency to stereotype immigrants has been pointed out by Bischoff (2018) and Karagiannis and Randeria (2018). For example, in some European countries, there are attempts by anti-immigration campaigners to establish links between Islam and terrorism on one hand, and Islam and the erosion of the culture of the host society on the other hand (Čáky, 2019). Some people also associate Black immigrants with dangerous and criminal behaviour (Paynter, 2022), and Kansteiner (2018) points out that despite the fact there is no sufficient evidence to support the stereotyping of immigrants, changing negative public opinion about migration and immigrants is difficult because, ‘Collective memories are not based in fact; they are based in stories, images, and feelings’ (p. 142).

Charles also described how discrimination affects Black people’s employment chances and prospects. He spoke about how some of his friends experienced downward mobility because they had to take jobs below their qualification. It is difficult to understand his friends’ level of education as he could not differentiate among a medical degree, PhD and bachelor’s degree. This is probably due to the fact that Charles had little education and did not understand the different types or levels of university qualifications. He seemed convinced though that these friends were underemployed because their educational certificates were from Africa. The literature on migration has identified that migrants from developing countries face difficulties transferring their education and skills to developed countries (Morrice et al., 2017; Slade, 2008):

S: I have a doctor... I have a friend, he is a doctor, a doctor degree in Nigeria. He graduated. I saw it. I saw him. What’s he doing here? Is it not a fabbrica (factory) work? But he went there to apply (Sneers again)

I: He has a PhD or he is a medical doctor?

S: A medical doctor. BXC

I: Okay, he has B.Sc.?

S: He has B.Sc. in Nigeria.

I: Oh, B.Sc.? Okay

S: B.Sc. but he doesn’t use it here

I: Oh, okay

S: So that is it now. That is it. You know...

I: Medical doctor?

S: He’s a medical doctor. Should I call him now?

I: Why didn't he go to another country to do something else?

S: You ask me, who I'm going to ask, bro? Let's move forward. Let's move forward, bro. Let's move forward. I have a friend... I still have a friend in Ancona. He's a graduate, B.Sc. graduate but I don't know what he read. He's a B.Sc. graduate. I know him right from childhood. I don't know what he's doing in Ancona right now.

Charles' inability to clarify his friend's qualification notwithstanding, he was convinced that his friend was working in a job below his qualification. He even offered to call him so I could confirm the truth of his claim from this friend. Guo (2014) has written that some immigrants from the global South in Canada experience downward social mobility because they have to make major shifts from the jobs they were doing in their home countries to entirely different sectors in the host country. Some highly skilled immigrants even have to take casual and part-time jobs making them unemployed and underutilised.

Charles also mentioned a shocking experience he had while looking for a job:

I went to look for work in a restaurant. The man look at me, say, "*Oh, ciao.*" Say, "*Parla Italiano bene. Eh! Eh!*" He say, "*You speak good Italian.*" When I gave her my curriculum, I turn back, he throw my curriculum into a dustbin. I turn my back. I went to the dustbin where he took... where he kept my curriculum. I pick up my curriculum and I left the... the hotel. You neva see anytin. You've not seen anything in Italy. We have so many things to say. We have so many things to say but Africans are not like this. In Africa, they can't treat a White man like this. They will give you escort. They will carry police. They will give you police. They will be guarding you. But here, they will treat you like trash, according to Donald Trump. He call Africa shithole. They call you shithole here but we are struggling. We will survive (laughs). We are trying our best, you know. That's it. we will survive. That's it.

Common restaurant work, they are discriminating you, looking down on you that you can't work there as a Black man. Okay, if an example... just use your leg, start walking in errr... in Milan. Start walking... Just walk with your foot. Go to restaurant by restaurant. You can only see few Black people working in a bar. Few. It could be only one person you will see in a big restaurant. Only one person. The rest will be in the kitchen so that White men will not stop coming to the restaurant. Your capo will tell you to be in the kitchen, "*Don't come outside o.*" So that he will not lose his client.

Charles highlights how it can be difficult for a Black person to get jobs in Italy, particularly jobs that require workers to interact with customers. He argues that business owners are afraid that employing Black workers may lead to loss of customers. Charles is not only showing how difficult it is to get a decent job, but the disrespect and racism that are experienced regularly by Black persons. The fear of losing customers is another demonstration that racism is systemic, otherwise, there would be no problem.

Both participants constructed experiences of othering in the form of discrimination. Their narratives reveal discrimination in different settings in the society such formal education setting, workplace and on public transport. The participants demonstrated that they had been learning that othering is rampant in Italy. In fact, Charles makes an emphatic declaration that Italy is the most racist country in Europe based on his personal experiences. While the participants might not be aware of the concepts of recognition and misrecognition, what their narratives reveal are experiences of misrecognition, since discrimination is a type of misrecognition (Fleming, 2022). Misrecognition takes place when a person is denied the respect or rights that they are entitled to as a morally responsible human being.

## *Learning to Cope with Discrimination: Reactions and Strategies*

In their narrations, Steve and Charles talked about how they dealt or were dealing with experiences of discrimination in Italy. Steve spoke about using those experiences as motivation or impetus to succeed in formal education and as a way to prove those who had written him off wrong. In describing his experience with the teacher who asked him to go and sit at the back of the class, Steve used the metaphor of football. He likened the teacher's words to a ball which was passed to him, and that he as a good player took the ball and made it his own. In other words, the teacher's words served as motivation for him to do well and prove her wrong:

That is what I'm saying. Like the first time I got to CPIA just the same way a teacher said to me "*I know you are a Nigerian and after a few months, you are going to run away.*" When... Those words came to me like a ball but then just like a good player, I knew how to take the ball and make it mine but there are some other people that that ball could also go to and they will lose balance and then lose everything, lose focus of what they are really doing. And then there comes the question, "*What am I really doing in this school if the teacher said this? Okay, they all know that Nigerians don't come to school, so what am I doing here? Let me follow the way of Nigerians.*" So that's it.

Steve stated that he reminded the teacher of her prediction on his first day of class. He also expressed hope that his success could contribute to changing the perception of Italians about Nigerians in Italy:

... Practically, let me tell you one secret. This is a secret: if you are in Italy and you're Black, you're French. Other countries don't exist. Other languages don't exist unless you tell them "*No, I'm Nigerian, I speak English.*" You speak "*English?*" Quindi, and then when you tell them I speak English, they will ask you again, "*You studied in English?*" "*Yes, I studied in English. Why does it sound so strange?*" "*No, because a lot of Africans don't speak English. And then a lot of Nigerians here too... Because we know Nigerians that take Libya to come into Italy are many times, most of the times are the cultists, armed robbers, those ones that, 'Hmm, Nigeria. I can't make a way. I can't make a living anymore for myself here. So let me go somewhere where it's a little bit easier.'*" But what we are trying to like... personally, what I am trying to change is to make these people understand that in every 100 of these people that come to Italy after creating trouble in Africa, there are also about 10, 20 good ones that are ready to learn the language, bring their head down, create a future for themselves here. So that's it.

It seemed this strategy was already working out for Steve. He had been able to establish relationships with Italians. He did extremely well in the language class which caught the attention of one of the teachers, and they started a romantic relationship. He also started a friendship with an Italian classmate:

The relationship between Africans and Italians is that, these people, the Italians, they kind of see how good you are like in studying, they tend to... because they tend to like people that tend to study a lot. They see you that you have a lot of... you want to... you have many goals that you like to achieve and you are working towards it... Even, there is one of this... the man has... he is 52 years old, we are still friends till today. Like we are friends till today. We... He sends me... At Christmas, he sends me gifts, all that. We were really close, we were really friends, but there was this other Italian, that in Italian, "*Cosi, cosi*" ... .

Formal education was important to Steve. It was his strategy for dealing with the negativities and difficulties he was experiencing in Italy. Steve revealed that his desire to

make his father proud was one of the reasons he was determined to make a success of himself.

I've always done this. I don't know how I even cope. I don't know how I cope but I've always... it has always been this way. That's why I was talking about determination. If you think money is important to you... When I... money is important to me too, yeah because my family is not the family of Buhari. I'm not from a wealthy family but my dad has always done everything possible to send us to school. Okay, and when I came to Italy, money is important for me too but why don't I just make my father proud because he has always done everything to send me to school. And since I have the opportunity to work and school because in Nigeria, practically you don't have the opportunity to work and school unless you are in the university. Here I can do the high school, even middle school with work at the same time. That's what I have been doing since 2018. So, it depends on your determination. If you are determined that you want to do this, it works out without you even stressing. Believe me, there are going to be times of stress. There are going to be times when you say, "*Right now, I'm going to give up. I'm not going to do this anymore*" but at the end of everything you find out that life just goes on. That's what I think. So, life just goes on. Working and schooling...

Before my interview with Charles started, he had told me that he wanted to get a particular document in Italy and would return to Belgium where he had lived for some time after his asylum application was approved. While still living in Italy, Charles's narrative revealed his response to his experiences in Italy. He mentioned the acceptance of the reality of discrimination but then he also mentioned that he could be combative on some occasions:

We don't get angry. We are used to it (laughs loudly). We are used to it. And anyone that confront you, you give him a dirty slap, then police will come.

Lo so. Lo so. I know all these thing. Me, I don't take it from them. Anyone that confront me, I beat him.

No. I beat him. When I beat him, the police will come. It's in the law. You don't have anyone... You don't have no right to harass me. Don't trek on my fundamental human right. Don't try it.

Charles seemed to have different responses than Steve to experiences of discrimination based on the circumstance. He seemed not to be bothered about subtle racism – which Paynter (2022) agrees is present in Italy – as he had come to terms with it, but he stated that he could be confrontational if he experienced glaring racism like being singled out for checks by a ticket controller on the train.

## Discussion

The narratives of Steve and Charles reveal experiences of othering in the form of stereotyping and discrimination. They both narrated personal experiences as well as general observations of discrimination that Black persons experience in Italy. It seemed because of their experiences, the participants had built their identities as outsiders in Italy and are finding it difficult to have a sense of belonging. Morrice (2013) calls this learning to be who and what they are not. From their narrations, both participants learned that they did not have the same rights as citizens of the host community, though their responses to their experiences differ. While Steve seemed intent on integrating into the society, and develops a theory of what Italians expect, Charles seems angrier, not interested in

integration, and in fact would appreciate finding his way out of Italy. In the words of Thunborg et al. (2021), Steve was learning to be a co-participant in the Italian society while Charles was learning to be disconnected. The participants' narrations of experiences offer several clues of misrecognition, disrespect and social injustice.

Honneth (2004) argues that 'the experience of social injustice is always measured in terms of the withholding of some recognition held to be legitimate' (p. 352). The participants' narratives reveal discrimination of Black persons taking place in almost every aspect of the society. It is instructive to note that except for Steve's experiences of discrimination in formal learning situations, where his status as an asylum seeker was obvious, the participants' other experiences of discrimination were not because of their residency status in Italy but because of the colour of their skin. One could argue that because of their status as asylum seeker and refugee they did not have enough social capital to seek redress where possible, and this might be why Charles felt physical confrontation was a last resort.

Steve's strategy of coping with discrimination was to do well academically and endear himself to Italians. His view was that if Italians saw someone who was serious with their academics, they would show acceptance to such a person. Paynter (2022) describes this attitude as proving one's deservingness of social belonging. While Paynter studied how asylum seekers in Italy conduct and comport themselves in order to gain favour with Italians with the hope of receiving a positive consideration of their asylum application, her study shows that asylum seekers adopt strategies to earn the approval of Italians. One of such strategies is the demonstration of their willingness and commitment to be integrated into the Italian culture or 'performing a kind of model citizenship' (Paynter, 2022, p. 9). Steve constructed an identity of an eager individual who wanted to feel a sense of belonging in the host society. Eschenbacher (2020) states that in the bid to fit into the host society, migrants develop a self or an identity to meet the expectations of the receiving society. Steve's statements also reveal his epistemic self which is that he believed that Italians would look favourably on an outsider, not least a Black person, who appeared serious about acquiring education and making a success of themselves. All this gives us an insight into how Steve was learning how to cope with life in Italy.

There seems to be a glimpse of recognition in Steve's narration. He stated that he struck a friendship with an Italian classmate, and he also mentioned that his girlfriend was one of his Italian teachers in middle school. On the surface, this seems like recognition in the first sphere of recognition identified by Honneth but a more critical look at Steve's relationship with his girlfriend can throw up some interesting considerations. One could wonder about the dynamics of power and intersubjective recognition in their relationship. One can also ask: Is interracial marriage a demonstration of integration?

While Steve's coping strategy was to prove his deservingness (Paynter, 2022), Charles seems to have different strategies: acceptance, escape or confrontation. His acceptance of the reality of discrimination in Italy informed his decision to leave Italy as soon as he could. Tuckett (2018) cited in Formenti and Luraschi (2020) asserts that the discrimination migrants face in Italy shapes and fuels their decision to leave the country. Charles also did not rule out confrontation in some situations. Honneth (1995) argues that experiences of misrecognition can lead to resistance and even societal conflicts. According to him, when individuals' experiences of misrecognition become typical for a whole group, then the group begins a collective struggle for recognition. This is usually in the form of restitution or correction for the disrespect they are experiencing. Thus, according to Honneth, the theory of recognition 'suggests the view that motives for social resistance and rebellion are formed in the context of moral experiences stemming from

the violation of deeply rooted expectations regarding recognition' (Honneth, 1995, p. 163). Charles constructed an identity of a 'nonconformist' who though accepted the reality of discrimination in Italy but refused to submit to it.

Implicit in the reactions of both Steve and Charles is a search for recognition. Steve seemed to have learned that a way to receive recognition is to prove his 'worthiness' to Italians while for Charles, he seemed to have learned that he was never going to be accorded the recognition he deserved in Italy. He had decided that leaving Italy for another country in Europe would bring him the recognition he deserved. Thus, he was intent on searching for recognition outside the shores of Italy.

## Conclusion

In this paper I explored how two asylum seekers from Nigeria learned to live with discrimination in Italy. I have shown their strategies for coping with discrimination through rich data obtained from using a narrative approach. The participants' stories reveal mainly experiences of misrecognition in encounters between Black asylum seekers and Italians in Italy. There are however glimpses of recognition, for example, the opportunity to access formal education. Most of the instances of misrecognition seem to be located in the second sphere of recognition identified by Axel Honneth; the sphere of rights. Recognition in the sphere of rights, according to Honneth, means every individual deserves to be regarded as a morally responsible person who is equal to others and have the same rights as others. The participants' narrations revealed that the two participants had learned to respond to experiences of discrimination in different ways. While the participants' experiences were not solely because of their status as asylum seekers but because of their racial background, I argue that their residency status might not give them the leverage or social capital to resist discrimination legally. This is because asylum seekers usually try to not to be careful not to jeopardise their asylum application as Paynter (2022) has pointed out. As a Black student in Italy, I have had course to make formal complaints about discrimination and this was expeditiously dealt with by the authorities. This appears not to be the case from my interactions with asylum seekers. Thus, making me feel that despite my racial background, I am more privileged than asylum seekers with the same racial background. Therefore, while race might play greater role in the experiences of discrimination that asylum seekers encounter, their social standing as persons of the margins of the society may contribute to making their situation more precarious.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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