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Article

An Ethnographic Study of Deaf Refugees Seeking Asylum in Finland

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Abstract: Deaf asylum seekers are a marginalized group of people in refugee and forced migration studies. The aim of this paper is to explore and highlight the experiences of deaf asylum seekers in the asylum procedure in Finland. The data come from linguistic ethnographic methods, interviews, and ethnographic observation with 10 deaf asylum seekers. While living in the reception centers, the study participants have faced a range of linguistic and social challenges. The findings show that language barriers appeared from day one after the participants' arrival in Finland. The investment and initiatives of deaf volunteers played a crucial role for deaf asylum seekers in their access to and participation in Finnish society. In addition, receiving formal Finnish sign language instruction had a positive effect on their well-being. Drawing on content analysis of deaf asylum seekers' experiences, I argue that greater awareness, recognition, and support of deaf asylum seekers are needed in the Finnish asylum system. I conclude this paper with a discussion of and suggestions for a better asylum system for deaf individuals.

Keywords: deaf asylum seeker; ethnography; experience; language barriers

1. Introduction

Deaf people are part of the one billion people in the world with a disability who have experienced human rights issues due to discrimination, inequalities, and barriers to accessibility and participation in their home countries [1] as well as in the context of forced migration [2,3]. Yet little attention has been paid to deaf refugees and asylum seekers and their experiences in the refugee camps and reception centers where they wait for decisions on their asylum applications. In addition, little is known about the experiences of refugees with disabilities living in displacement [3,4] and their challenges while seeking protection [2].

There are several studies on refugees' narratives about their identities and experiences in displacement [5–7], but deaf refugees are often marginalized in refugee studies because no shared language and/or interpreting is available [3,8]. Another explanation may be that they have not been recognized as a special, yet heterogeneous group among refugees seeking asylum. Deaf refugees and asylum seekers may often arrive in a country not understanding the host country's sign language or they may not have used any sign language before [9]. However, they may also have some oral or literacy skills in their language of origin, use home signs, have fluency in a recognized sign language and/or some ability in a language they may have learned as a lingua franca. Furthermore, International Sign (IS), which is widely used in international settings where deaf people communicate with each other when they do not share the same native sign language [10], may often be unknown to deaf refugees and asylum seekers. In the Finnish Act on the Reception of Persons Applying International Protection and on the Identification of and Assistance of Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings (746/2011), section 15, on providing information, states that all information is to be provided in written form in a person's mother tongue or in a language the person could fairly understand. The information

can be given in a spoken (signed) language as well. Section 27, on translation and interpreting, states that an issue can be interpreted or translated into a language the customer could fairly understand [11]. In practice, however, this approach may be problematic and does not work well for deaf asylum seekers in the asylum procedure, because deaf refugees may have different language and communication profiles, and these may not be suitable for the Finnish asylum procedure. Furthermore, it is often the case in Finland that there are no sign language interpreters who are proficient in the sign language of refugees' home countries.

Refugees with disabilities must "rank among the world's most vulnerable persons" because they face and experience several different challenges and their disability makes it difficult to participate in society [2] (p. 736). Crock et al. [3] found that refugees with a disability rarely have access to opportunities to learn the language of their host countries even though knowing the language of the host country would help them to participate in society.

Drawing on previous research on refugee studies and deaf asylum seekers, the aim of this paper is to answer the following research question using ethnographic data: How do deaf asylum seekers experience living and communicating in reception centers? This paper offers some important insights into deaf asylum seekers' experiences of living and communicating in reception centers and their linguistic needs during the asylum procedure. The study of deaf people has been approached from two perspectives: The medical view and the linguistic-cultural view [12]. In this study, deaf asylum seekers are approached predominantly from the linguistic-cultural view, but also with a more general focus on linguistic human rights. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) [13], article 9 (accessibility to information and communication), article 21 (access to information), and article 24 (education) are used in this study as background, but they are not addressed on a deeper level.

I begin this paper with a review of the literature on deaf people among disabled refugees in forced migration studies. I also review communication and narratives in sign languages. Then, I present my research data, methods, and analytical approach, where I also briefly consider my positionality and the ethical issues of this study. The third section presents the findings of the research, focusing on three themes: Loneliness, the role of deaf volunteers, and challenges in communication. This paper concludes with a critical discussion of the right to access and learn a host country's sign languages as part of a fairer asylum procedure.

1.1. Overview of Literature on Deaf Refugees

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of interest in deaf refugees across Europe as reflected in social media, magazines of deaf associations, and sign language media (see, e.g., Reference [14]). Yet there is little research on deaf refugees and asylum seekers or on deaf migrants and the challenges that they encounter in host countries.

However, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has reported that the refugee population has rapidly increased worldwide in recent years, with the total currently at 65.6 million refugees [15]. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that about 15% of the world's population has some kind of disability [1] and the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) reports that there are about 70 million deaf people [16]. Applying these numbers to the world's refugee population in 2016, Crock et al. estimated that there would be about 10 million disabled refugees [3]. However, there are still no systematic data and statistics on disabled refugees [3,15] and no statistics on deaf refugees, either. To date, there have typically been only brief references to deaf refugees and asylum seekers in the refugee studies literature, some examples of which are included in this section. These references are mostly related to communication and language difficulties faced by deaf refugees in displacement. Calling for deaf refugees to participate in different kinds of studies, Crock et al. argued that in their research with refugees, it was difficult to identify deaf refugees because they have an invisible disability, and deaf refugees may not understand the invitation to take part in reports and studies [3]. Furthermore, it was also a challenge to communicate with deaf people in refugee settlements because no common shared language and sign language interpreting services were available [3]. Similarly,

a study by Ward, Amas, and Lagnado found that deaf asylum seekers in the UK faced multiple barriers, which were mostly linked to language difficulties and a lack of interpreters [9]. Roberts [17] stated that disabled asylum seekers and refugees, including deaf ones, are not recognized in the UK, because there are no statistics on them, and was among the first to call for greater awareness of deaf refugees among service providers as well as among disability and refugee communities almost 20 years ago. When deaf asylum seekers are resettled, she suggests, it would be good to ensure that they have the opportunity to access an interpreter in their own national sign language, if one is available. This could be accomplished by settling them in a larger city, such as London, where there is a better chance that such support exists [17]. This means that spreading deaf asylum seekers across the country is not recommended, because sign language interpreting services may not be available in smaller villages and towns. In addition, when they are resettled in larger cities, deaf asylum seekers may have a better opportunity to participate in the signing community and learn the sign languages of the host country.

In an interesting case study, Harris and Roberts examined the process and the languages used in interviews with deaf asylum seekers in the UK. The interviews were often multilevel and involved the participation of several people. The study showed that despite the challenge of discussing abstract concepts, the interviews mostly concerned concrete issues and facts, and were successful [18].

The examination by deaf researcher Youngs [8] of the educational context in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya may be the first broad study of deaf refugees' experiences in a camp. She found that the role of Deaf Unit, the deaf education program in Dadaab Refugee Camp, is important and that it has empowered deaf refugees with sign language and strengthened their identities and self-determination. However, multiple studies have reported challenges faced by deaf refugees in resettlement across educational, health care, and psychological contexts [19,20]. Willoughby [21] wrote a report on the challenges deaf people with a migrant background in Australia faced in learning a new language, accessing services, and integrating into their new community. In her report, she found that many who had arrived in Australia faced both educational and linguistic barriers because they used their home sign as their primary means of communication [21]. A study by Watkins, Razees, and Richters demonstrated that general literacy proficiency is important, because limited education in the country of departure can hinder a person's ability to succeed in the educational context of the host country [22]. In summary, previous research shows that deaf asylum seekers may not always understand the sign language of the host country and those who use home sign as their primary method of communication encounter multiple communication challenges [9,21]. Due to the gap in the existing literature, more research is needed to increase our understanding and knowledge of deaf refugees' experiences and of the challenges in displacement and asylum procedures.

1.2. Multilingual and Multimodal Deaf Communities

Deaf signing people and the deaf communities around the world are often multilingual and multicultural, using different modalities in everyday communication, such as signing, writing and, in some cases, speaking [23]. Glottolog, the bibliographic database on the little-known languages in the world, lists 183 sign languages in the world [24], but according to the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), there are more than 300 [16]. Fenlon and Wilkinson have criticized these estimates because research on the world's sign languages is still young. In some countries, sign languages are still being documented, particularly in microcommunities such as small villages [25]. They argue that the real number of sign languages around the world remains unknown [25].

Deaf communities constitute a linguistic and cultural minority in relation to the dominant, hearing communities that use spoken languages [26,27]. Here, it should be noted that the deaf community also includes hearing people who use sign language as a first language (e.g., children of deaf parents, or siblings) or as a second language [26]. Yet all deaf people do not have access to the signing community for a range of reasons, such as being unaware of the existence of a deaf community and the sign language(s) of their country, the lack of a tradition of deaf education, and isolation at home. Deaf people, therefore, have not had the opportunity to meet other deaf people and develop a shared

signing system and community. Haualand and Allen reported that approximately 90% of deaf children and adults around the world have never received any education at all [28]. They also may not have the opportunity to maintain and practice their sign language communication due to, for example, limited mobility caused by fatigue and the political situation of their country of origin, including conflict situations, such as wars. Therefore, deaf peoples' proficiency may vary significantly not only in their national sign language of origin [28], but also in their regional and/or indigenous sign languages. Not having access to sign language, deaf people may use a different kind of visual and multimodal communication with their families, friends, and hearing people, one that consists of gesturing, pointing, drawing or home signs to various degrees [21,29–31].

When deaf people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds meet and communicate with each other at deaf international events, they often use the communication method called International Sign (IS), which represents a linguistic contact strategy as well as linguistic accessibility [10]. Zeshan calls this kind of multilingual and multimodal communication between deaf signers with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds “cross-signing” [32]. Sign languages around the world have some similarities and differences in grammatical and lexical structures due to their visual–gestural modality [23]. Drawing on the iconicity and gestural base of sign languages is typical in the practice of IS, which works as a lingua franca [10]. According to Mesch [33], IS can refer to two practices of signing in international contexts: Ad-hoc IS, which also means cross-signing, and conventionalized IS. Conventionalized IS further refers to expository IS, which consists of signs that are understandable to different sign language users and it is used mostly at deaf international events [10]. The definition of IS remains problematic, and it is a complex communication system [10].

Whynot, says that IS has become “a popular descriptor of contact signing, regardless of contexts and individuals” (p. 5), and suggests that the term be more clearly and deeply defined [11]. Whynot also makes clear through her study that “IS is not a fully conventional language” (p. 288). It is made up by deaf people with international travel and contact experiences who also have multilingual competency [11]. For these reasons, IS may not be useful for deaf refugees.

Travelling, knowing other sign languages, and attending international deaf events [11] may no longer be necessary for practicing IS, because signed videos in IS on social media such as Facebook are a growing phenomenon among the signing community worldwide. Using a technologically mediated form of visual communication and access to the Internet have led to the creation of multilingual environments among deaf people around the world [25], a situation that may increase the practice of IS. The number of sign language interpreters with IS skills is also increasing worldwide. They are used at different deaf and hearing international events, such as those for the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), the United Nations, and the European Union [34]. Despite the fact that IS may lack native speakers and any country affiliation, it is still used and practiced by, for example, sign language interpreters for international events (for more on this, see Reference [35]).

2. Research Setting and Methodology

2.1. Participants of This Study

This article is based on an ethnographic study of 10 deaf adult asylum seekers, consisting of four women and six men, with an Arabic background from the Middle East. The deaf signing community in Finland is small, so to protect their identities, I will not mention their countries of origin. In addition, I conducted formal and informal interviews with 10 informants (staff at the reception centers, volunteers, teachers of Finnish Sign Language (FinSL), and an adviser from the Folk High School for the Deaf (an adult education institute) who worked with deaf asylum seekers. All participants arrived in Finland in 2015, and the data were collected during between 2015 and 2017 (see Table 1). The participants for this study were recruited through emails sent to 31 reception centers. In response to the emails, I chose only adult participants over the age of 18 years. Deaf asylum seekers

were asked to meet me by hearing staff at the reception centers. After the first interview, we exchanged mobile phone numbers in order to arrange the next meetings and visits through video messages.

Table 1. Participants (all names are pseudonyms).

Participant	Sex	Age (Approx.)	1. Interview	2. Interview	3. Interview
1. Sahar	F	30–40	March 2016	November 2016	May 2017
2. Khalid	M	40–50	March 2016	November 2016	May 2017
3. Qaseem	M	20–30	March 2016	December 2016	May 2017
4. Rami	M	30–40	March 2016	December 2016	May 2017
5. Nabil	M	40–50	October 2015	April 2016	-
6. Sara	F	30–40	March 2016	December 2016	-
7. Myron	M	40–50	November 2015	May 2017	-
8. Jamila	F	40–50	November 2015	-	-
9. Lufti	M	50–60	May 2016	-	-
10. Amina	F	40–50	May 2016	-	-

Participants were emergent readers, meaning they were beginner-level readers in Arabic. They reported that their proficiency in the sign languages of their home countries, Arab Sign, varied from home sign to fluent Arab Sign. The participants reported and described their signing as “Arab Sign”. In Arab countries, there are a number of different sign languages, including nation-state sign languages and an unknown number of smaller sign languages [36]. Al-Fityani and Padden point out that sign languages in the Arab World may also develop within families and tribes due to, among other factors, cultural, social, and political circumstances which restrict contact among deaf signing communities [36]. Similar to the participants in Hendrick’s study [31], the participants referred to their language as only Arab Sign, and they did not call it the sign language of their home country. It was unclear which sign language the participants were using. They reported that along with Arab Sign, home signs and gesturing were widely used in their everyday communication with their families and hearing people. Participants had only attended formal education for two to four years, and sign language had not been used at school, because most countries in the Arab Region do not provide bilingual education [28]. The participants in this study had received little formal education.

2.2. Interviewing and Observations

Interviewing the participants for this study was initially challenging because we had no fluent shared language with which to communicate, even though both the participants and I were all deaf. In Finland, there were no sign language interpreters with proficiency in the participants’ national sign language, so no interpreters were used in our interviews. It was not known prior to the interviews which language the interviewee would use. For example, it was not clear beforehand whether an interviewee would use a sign language used by the deaf community of their country of origin or whether the interviewee would be familiar with conventionalized IS. Conventionalized IS is familiar to me and I know several other sign and spoken/written languages. I also have experiences of travelling and living abroad and have attended many deaf international events. Having that multilingual competence and experience, I could adapt and switch my signing using a variety of linguistic and other semiotic resources, but not Arab Sign. No writing or fingerspelling was used during our interviews and meetings. With those participants who started to learn FinSL, it was possible to use FinSL in the later interviews. In such situations, the third interview was carried out using mainly FinSL. In Section 3.1 of this article, I present a typical example of how deaf asylum seekers expressed their stories (and of interaction with them as a whole).

I conducted a total of 14 interviews, 7 individual and 7 group interviews, in different reception centers around Finland, in participants’ school or the new homes where they had resettled. The group interviews consisted of married couples and several participants in group interviews were also interviewed individually at a later date.

Interviews often took place in a meeting room or in participants' bedrooms at the reception centers. In the group interviews, deaf men typically talked more than the women did. The topics of the first interview included the interviewees' backgrounds, their arrival to Finland, and experiences of communication and language learning in FinSL. The second interview covered subjects such as the participants' experiences of living and communicating in FinSL. The third and final interview addressed their asylum procedure, as well as their language use and learning. It was often difficult to ask questions that included signs for abstract concepts, such as experience, asylum, language, and the future. The 10 informant interviews were conducted at interviewees' workplaces, at a seminar and via smartphones. During these interviews, I asked about their thoughts and experiences regarding working with deaf asylum seekers.

Having no shared language with deaf asylum seekers, pictures on a consent form were used, along with mixed sign languages and gesturing, as visual aids to describe what I was doing with the data. At every interview, I asked and checked again about their willingness to participate in the study.

All interviews were video-recorded, except for one group interview. At a later stage, one participant declined to be video-recorded but still wanted to participate in the study. A total of 8 h and 18 min of video were recorded. The average length of the interviews was 40 min. The first interviews were made two weeks to five months after the research participants' arrival in Finland. For various reasons, all participants were not interviewed three times. For example, some of the participants were deported from Finland after the first or the second interview. Most of the participants in this study received a negative decision on their asylum about six months to a year and half after their arrival in Finland, and most of them appealed their decision.

I also made approximately 100 h of observation during the two-year period. I attended and participated in a deaf immigrant course, a seminar where some of the participants were involved. I also observed the daily lives of participants at six different reception centers. I also visited a deaf club with them and followed their FinSL learning at school. I made notes of these visits in several notebooks and made approximately 30 h of video recordings. I observed how and where the participants lived, how they communicated in person and with other hearing and deaf refugees, as well as how they learned FinSL through interaction with others, such as other deaf students, sign language teachers, and me.

2.3. Analysis of the Data

The data for this article were analyzed using content analysis, studying the linguistic data by categorizing and analyzing the content and structure of the material [37]. I then transcribed the data into written Finnish. Transcribing the data was challenging because there were some specific signs, gestures, and utterances I did not understand and could not translate. Therefore, translations may contain gaps and misunderstandings. I then re-watched the videos while reading the written translation. The transcription software program ELAN was also used, where I could include tiers for free translations and comments (e.g., for gestural pointing, gestures, and misunderstandings). I started to analyze the data immediately after collecting them. I also started to categorize the data cyclically. I approached the data using grounded theory, developed by Glaser and Strauss [38,39]. I then identified themes that emerged from the data. The data were handled manually and with the help of Atlas.ti qualitative software.

3. Findings

3.1. Lonely and Isolated Life at Reception Centers

The amount of time for an asylum decision varied by each individual, but in 2015, it took about six months to receive a decision [40] and during that time, asylum seekers were sent to reception centers. Reception centers in Finland offer services such as social and health services, interpreting, labor and study activities, and Finnish language teaching [41]. The participants in this study received the same services as other asylum seekers, but Finnish language and FinSL were not initially provided

to them, even though language classes or working activities are obligatory for asylum seekers when they are settled in reception centers. Some began receiving formal FinSL lessons about a year after their arrival in Finland, partly because of the pressure from deaf volunteers and NGOs in Finland (see References [42,43]). Others, however, never got the chance to learn FinSL, because they were deported from this country. There was not a single deaf person working at the centers. As refugee law expert Ghezelbash states, this placement is a form of long-term detention where asylum seekers are controlled by the government and though they “may be physically present in the state, they are precluded from entering the community” [44] (p. 36). This statement fits this study well, because the participants in this study were assigned in the beginning to different reception centers around Finland and often excluded from the signing community.

The participants rarely met with signing people at reception centers, such as deaf volunteers and sign language interpreters, while some met once a week, once a month or even less often. This issue, combined with the lack of vital shared information and communication with other hearing residents and workers, often caused deaf asylum seekers to have difficulties in taking part in activities at the centers and left them feeling lonely and isolated (see, e.g., References [9,45]). Deaf asylum seekers reported that they were often confused, depressed, and that their bodies showed post-traumatic symptoms. They also had difficulty sleeping. Waiting and living at the reception center was stressful. Nabil (name changed), who was the only deaf person at his reception center, reported his experiences and thoughts about living at the center, five months after his arrival in Finland. Nabil’s case was not exceptional, as the other participants of this study had similar experiences. Nabil never received formal FinSL lessons during his asylum procedure and conventionalized IS was unfamiliar to him.

It hurts my heart, stomach and legs. I (only) think, sit and wait. It is horrible. You (Nina) have a husband and children around you. You are happy. (I am not). My wife and my children are not here. It hurts my heart. If they were here, I would be happy. You have a husband and children. You are happy. You understand. It is lovely. I feel anxious here. Our head is full of thinking. NABIL, Interview 2 (Spring 2016)

Understanding his thoughts and feelings was relatively easy in the context of asylum, because the interview took place at the reception center. Because we did not have a shared sign language, he needed to narrate his experience, so he used gestures, pointing, and some lexical signs from his country of origin. For this quotation, I present how Nabil expressed himself in a written multimodal transcription. This way of expressing and signing was also common for other deaf participants in the first interviews and for those who received no formal FinSL lessons during this study.

Nabil told his story about living at the reception center with strong facial expressions and pointed at his heart to express the pain he felt. Then he described a heart with his hands, pressing them together hard and pointing again to his heart to describe it beating by opening and closing his hands and then further describing that his heart hurts by again pressing his hands together. He continued pointing and circled both of his hands on his stomach and further down his thighs. Then he pointed to his forehead with his hand and with gestures or signing in the sign language of his home country expressed the action of waiting by leaning his body forward and putting his hand on his cheek and then crossing his hands on his lap. He shrugged and spread his hands with a palms-up gesture. Afterwards, he pointed again to his body with his hand and expressed deep frustration and stress with his facial expression, simultaneously shaking his hands. I translated this story (38:26–38:32) in the following way: “It hurts my heart, stomach and legs. I (only) think, sit and wait. It is horrible.” He described living in the reception center as a painful experience. With no full communication or access to shared information, the charged atmosphere of the reception center made living stressful for him because he only waited for something to happen or for someone, a deaf researcher like me or sign language interpreters, to show up, so we could sign with him and explain things to him. His body had reacted with pain in his heart, stomach, and legs, because it is difficult to try to understand what is going on and what is talked about at reception centers in stressful situations.

He then continued to compare my family situation and his family situation. He started to smile and pointed at me. He continued by pointing at his ring finger and then described children by moving his body forward and down to illustrate taking a child to his arms and then holding and hugging the child. He then pointed at me again, continued describing in the same way as before and then moved both hands away from his chest and heart with palms up and a happy face utterance. Then, suddenly, his expression of a happy face changed to a serious one, and he held his palms up for one second. This description (38:32–38:36) was translated as “You have a husband and children around you. You are happy. (I am not).” This statement showed that having his family there with him meant having communication. Separation from his own family has also led to a feeling of loneliness, which is also common for young people and children among refugees [46].

For the next utterance (38:37–38:41), he looked to the other side and down and pointed at his ring finger and signed “children” in his sign language of origin and pressed both hands to his body and looked at me at the same time. Then, he slapped his hands twice, meaning nothing. I translated this to mean that his wife and children were not here. He continued to press his hands to his body and then closed his hand hard in front of his heart and showed the facial expression of feeling pain. I interpreted this to mean that it hurt his heart that his family was not here with him. He continued to use the opposite notions of happiness and sadness so that I could understand him clearly. In his next utterance (38:42–38:46), he started to smile again, pointed at his ring finger, looked down, and described hugging his children in the same way as he did earlier. Then he laid both of his hands on his heart and opened his hands to a palm-up position in front of his body with a facial expression of happiness. This still position lasted for a second. With this utterance, he meant that if his family were here, he would be happy. Then he nodded his head once, expressed “do you understand?” with his facial expression and made a thumbs-up gesture. He continued by pointing first at me, then his ring finger, and then he described children and happiness in the same way as previously. He pointed at me again and made another thumbs-up gesture, meaning that it is good and lovely.

Finally, for his “last” utterance (38:47–38:50) he pointed at himself, then at the reception center where he was living and showed an uptight face and half-closed his hands in front of his body, close to his face. He ended by pointing at the people around the reception center and himself and described thinking with a worried face expression. Then, he pointed and made circling motions on both sides of his temples with his index fingers. He meant that he felt anxious being at the reception center and that he and the other residents were thinking about the asylum procedure in a tense atmosphere.

Fleeing one country and then arriving in a new one, to a new language and culture, having almost no one to discuss and share one’s experiences and thoughts with, is difficult. For Nabil, as with other participants in this study, life in the reception center was challenging, because the atmosphere at the centers was often charged, with people constantly arriving and leaving. Hearing residents at the reception centers often shared advice, information, thoughts, and experiences about asylum hearings and other issues they had encountered in Finland. Yet for deaf asylum seekers, it was much more difficult to participate in these activities and discussions at the centers when there was no shared language, and no one knew how to sign and communicate fluently with them. A few of the participants in this study found a hearing “friend”, another asylum seeker, who came from the same home country with whom they could gesture and have some kind of limited communication. Those hearing friends sometimes volunteered as language brokers between the study participants and hearing staff in very short conversations. The participants of this study had been transferred to different reception centers during their asylum procedure. Compared to those participants in this study who were located in the countryside, those who were transferred to bigger cities found themselves somewhat less isolated because they could meet other signing people more often. As for the rest of the data, I will not describe in detail how the participants expressed themselves. (For issues about multimodal interaction data, see References [47,48]).

3.2. Many Vital Roles for Deaf Volunteers

In 2015, a record number of refugees (32,476 asylum seekers, 10 times more than during the previous year) arrived in Finland and 184 new reception centers were established [40]. At the same time in social media, a Facebook group called “Deaf Refugees in Finland”, which was later changed to “Deaf refugees and immigrants in Finland”, was created. In this group, members of the deaf community in Finland shared information and asked deaf people to volunteer to meet deaf asylum seekers in the reception centers (this group no longer exists). Kaun and Uldam studied the role of social media platforms in encouraging civic participation and engagement of local volunteers during the so-called refugee crisis [49]. In other parts of Europe, deaf people’s engagement in volunteering and exchanging information on social media platforms such as Facebook was remarkable. In Finland, however, only a few deaf people volunteered [14]. Presumably all deaf asylum seekers in the reception centers around Finland were not identified and located by deaf volunteers. Therefore, not all the participants of this study were fortunate enough to have a deaf volunteer visit them, mostly because the reception centers where some of the participants lived were located far away from the bigger cities in Finland, and also because there was no announcement to the deaf community regarding where the deaf asylum seekers were housed. Based on my observations and reports by the participants who were visited by deaf volunteers at their reception centers, these visits, though rare, were significant and long-awaited.

Deaf volunteers were often the ones deaf participants could best communicate with because of the shared visual–gestural modality of sign languages, even though there was no fluent shared language between them at the beginning. Because deaf volunteers could understand their thoughts, feelings, and experiences of traumas and violence better than others, they also became support people for the participants. Deaf volunteers mainly used FinSL with the deaf asylum seekers, but there was also some gesturing and use of IS. Because the participants had entered Finland, a different linguistic and cultural society from their home country of origin, volunteers ended up supporting and working as guides to Finnish society for them. Vital information about living in Finland and everyday matters, such as how to use the local bus or where budget shops could be found, was often taught, shared, and shown by deaf volunteers. At the same time, participants learned some FinSL for different situations by seeing and doing (see also Reference [50]). Deaf asylum seekers in this study had received extensive written formal and informal information from the reception centers and authorities. Yet they often did not understand the texts, and they frequently asked deaf volunteers to help translate the text, as Sara reported:

“Don’t understand. I can’t read and write. I took pictures of a piece of paper and sent it to X (sign name of deaf volunteer). X explained and signed to me and I understood”. SARA, interview 1 (Spring 2016)

The participants in this study, such as Sara, were emergent readers. For this reason, it was challenging for them to understand the texts, which were oddly often in Finnish, probably for bureaucratic reasons. Deaf volunteers could read and translate the texts for the deaf asylum seekers face-to-face or by sending video messages to them. Technology, specifically a smartphone’s camera application, was a good tool in the absence of deaf volunteers. Smartphones gave deaf asylum seekers the opportunity to take photos of the environment and/or informational texts from different places and notes/letters they did not understand and needed more information about in sign language and gestures. They also used signed video messages. When deaf volunteers were absent, smartphones often worked as a tool for sharing information remotely. Smartphones seemed to provide some safety as well as access to information through the sending of pictures and video messages in sign languages.

Deaf volunteers were also FinSL teachers and language role models for deaf asylum seekers. Deaf asylum seekers were often sensitive about using sign language publicly and freely after their arrival in Finland. In their countries of origin, deaf people may often face discrimination, abuse, and exclusion [51]. Finnish deaf volunteers used sign language freely with deaf asylum seekers, which may

have caused some positive confusion because they were often not used to signing in public. The next excerpt is from my fieldnotes in a reception center.

“We sat in a dining hall, where there were a lot of tables. We wanted to drink tea and there was a kitchen. In the kitchen there were young asylum seeker boys and I went there and asked them if they could boil hot water for us. I signed and gestured to them. They understood me well. I noticed that X (deaf asylum seeker) was ‘horrified’ when I signed to them and I did not feel ashamed. X had not talked with hearing asylum seekers before. When we got the tea to our table we talked about everything. X said that in X (his home country) they can’t sign freely and he was surprised that here it is OK to sign. I told him that in Finland we can sign freely anywhere, outside and inside. We do not need to be ashamed of using sign language. When we talked and signed, hearing asylum seekers watched us carefully. This was an interesting moment and X (deaf asylum seeker) had a realization and understood that he has a right to sign and use sign language freely”. (field note 29 October 2015)

There are remarkable differences between the status of deaf people and sign languages in Finland and in the asylum seekers’ home countries. FinSL is recognized as a minority language in Finnish legislation. There are also national sign language interpreting services provided by the state. Most Finnish deaf people, therefore, are used to signing, from early childhood to old age, in most life situations. One of the research participants was surprised when I took the initiative to communicate with other hearing asylum seekers through gesturing. Participants made contact with hearing people when forced to do so, but otherwise they tend to avoid contact with hearing people. Being in Finland, and especially in a reception center, they may have again feared being discriminated against by hearing asylum seekers. Therefore, having deaf volunteers as language role models seemed to develop a stronger self-confidence in deaf asylum seekers and gave them more courage to communicate with hearing people at the reception center by, for example, gesturing. They seem to understand that it was safe to use sign languages and gestures in Finland.

Deaf asylum seekers were not the only ones who took advantage of deaf volunteers. The staff of reception centers did as well. Deaf volunteers also worked as language brokers between staff and deaf residents at reception centers or advised staff on different deaf-related issues, such as finding sign language interpreters with IS skills. They also suggested that hearing staff arrange visits for deaf asylum seekers to the nearest local deaf club in order to meet other deaf people and learn FinSL. Visits to the deaf clubs were very much appreciated by the participants and they reported that they had no deaf clubs in their country of origin. Deaf men in their country of origin met other deaf men on the streets. Women reported that they stayed at home taking care of their households.

3.3. Challenges in Communication during the Asylum Procedure

The main and significant findings of this study show that the communication and language proficiency of both the participants and their interlocutors had been challenging during the asylum procedure. Communication and language were significant factors in the well-being of the participants in this study. The participants were not aware that they were entering a linguistically difficult asylum procedure until they developed their FinSL proficiency and noticed that there had been misunderstandings and that their way of explaining and communicating was often not understood correctly.

“I was frustrated that they could not understand me at first! I signed differently!” RAMI, interview 2 (Winter 2016)

Communication problems often occurred in daily encounters in reception centers. For example, Rami reported that he repeatedly asked for a vibrating alarm clock from the reception center for a long time without success. Finally, after several months, Rami developed his FinSL skills and he could explain more clearly what he wanted. Rami received and attended formal FinSL lessons for almost

a year after his arrival in Finland. He enjoyed it immensely, as did all the other participants who had the chance to receive formal FinSL instruction. The participants in this study who received formal FinSL teaching started to use FinSL daily, even with their family members. FinSL tuition was provided for the deaf adults but not for their hearing children. Yet hearing children learned from, and used some FinSL with, their deaf parents. As a result of receiving FinSL teaching and improving his FinSL skills in the second interview, Rami mentioned that he realized that he had previously been signing incorrectly and that no one understood him. He was annoyed that people did not understand him well due to his limited proficiency in FinSL and IS.

The participants' proficiency in their sign language of origin varied significantly, from fluent Arab Sign to gesturing and/or home sign. Having no access to FinSL classes and not knowing IS at the beginning made it difficult for them to participate in different events and understand matters that were discussed and announced during the asylum procedure. Sign language interpreters were a new concept and experience for the participants. They had never used or met formal and legal sign language interpreters before, even in their country of origin. Children and their hearing family members were used as language brokers in their home country as well as in displacement see [9,52,53].

In Finland, there were no sign language interpreters who knew the interviewees' sign language of origin and/or any sign languages from Arab countries. Finnish authorities had ordered spoken Arabic interpreters for them at different, usually high-stakes, interviews, often without success. Finnish Sign language interpreters and interpreters with IS skills were also ordered for them, but those cases remained rare and were often related to health issues, information sessions at reception centers about the asylum procedure, and in asylum hearings. The participants quickly learned the meaning of IS and learned some signs in IS, but they did not distinguish between IS or FinSL while communicating with signing people. When sign language interpreters were not available, hearing staff at reception centers tried several solutions to communicate with participants, such as writing notes in Arabic, gesturing and using images of a doctor, police or food, for example. One center in this study ordered video messages in IS from one sign language interpreter company, but this attempt was unsuccessful even though it contained simple information, such as the date, time, and place. Participants needed face-to-face communication, where both the signer and the recipient could adapt their signing by giving feedback, repeating, and asking for clarification.

Staff at the reception centers had noticed that deaf asylum seekers had challenges in communication despite the sign language interpreters provided to them at the centers when they needed to participate in important situations. Staff made it clear that language proficiency was important for going through the asylum procedure. In this study, women were often interpreted by their husbands, a phenomenon that was also identified in a study by Ward et al., where it was found that due to cultural issues, women do not frequently speak (or sign) [9].

"I don't know if the person has the knowledge to say enough and affect the decision in a positive way with his story. This makes me really concerned." (Worker at the reception center, spring 2016)

One hearing worker was concerned about one deaf asylum seeker in particular who lacked proficiency in FinSL and IS. She was unsure if the individual had enough knowledge and skills to fully understand and communicate in Finland in any language provided by the asylum authorities. When one has limited language proficiency, it is difficult to tell things to authorities and the risk of misunderstanding is very high. In the following excerpt, Rami reflected on his language proficiency during the third interview, a little more than a year and a half after his arrival in Finland:

"At the reception center there was another (asylum seeker) who came from the same hometown in X (country of origin) as me. He got asylum fast! I was surprised and asked and wondered why, he did not lie. (...) we got a negative decision. Allah, we still hope. (...) He is hearing! He can speak. He can speak easily and powerfully. I can't (speak). I am deaf

and I have to repeat my signing many times and it is hard. Now it is going better (signing). I hope for the best.” RAMI, male participant, interview 3

When he received a negative asylum decision, Rami compared his language proficiency to that of hearing asylum seekers. He felt that it was easier for hearing asylum seekers to explain their reasons for seeking asylum in a spoken language, which was interpreted into Finnish. Rami felt his disability, deafness, and limited language proficiency was a reason for the negative asylum decision. He felt that he could not talk or speak to the authorities in any language and he was entirely reliant on sign language interpreters, even though there was no fluent shared language. There was no other choice but to accept the situation and hope for the best. Being alone as a deaf person and having very limited communication with other people at the reception center for a long period can have a negative and serious effect on a person’s use of their own national sign language of origin and/or their way of communication. Almost all of the participants had a smartphone and access to the Internet. Some of them had purchased a smartphone in Finland. They used a free mobile application for video messaging, such as WhatsApp or IMO. Video messaging, either live or recorded, provided an opportunity to keep in touch with families and friends.

“... before I could sign well in X (his home country of origin), but now when I talked with my family through live video conversations (on a mobile phone), I did not understand what they were signing. (...) Before I knew a lot, but not now. They (a deaf person in a store) sign and fingerspell something. I do not understand. I do not understand both (languages). (laughs)”. NABIL, Interview 2 (Spring 2016)

Nabil reported that his proficiency in his home country’s sign language had weakened during his stay in Finland, because he did not have opportunities to maintain and use his home sign during the asylum procedure. Nabil did not understand all of what his deaf family signed, nor what a Finnish deaf person he met at a store signed. With the laughter, he meant that he realized it was absurd to not understand his home sign nor Arab Sign, while FinSL was still unknown, even though he had lived in Finland for six months already. He was moving from a home sign system to a more formalized sign system. Other participants reported a similar phenomenon: They had “forgotten” Arab Sign and they wanted to learn FinSL and IS while living in Finland. They often did not want to have contact with their home country, and even wanted to forget their first language, Arab Sign. For Nabil in this study, video messaging through a smartphone was not effective for maintaining his sign language, but further research would be required to fully understand why this was the case.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings show that language barriers appeared from day one after the participants’ arrival in Finland. For the deaf asylum seekers in this study, who had limited education and literacy proficiency, the asylum procedure was challenging. The limited or absent communication of deaf asylum seekers has caused loneliness and isolation while positioning them unequally at the reception centers. Deaf asylum seekers could not fully participate in discussions and share experiences and knowledge about the asylum procedure with other hearing asylum seekers in the reception center. The present findings also support the study by Crock et al., which concluded that the communication barriers encountered by deaf refugees in displacement were significant [3]. Moreover, placing deaf asylum seekers alone in reception centers without any contact with other deaf asylum seekers has proven to be highly problematic. Housing during the asylum process should be developed in order to provide the opportunity for deaf asylum seekers to live together and have better access to the same services (language learning, interpreting) as hearing asylum seekers do.

The investment of deaf volunteers and opportunities for social participation in the signing community of the host country were highly valued by the participants. Deaf volunteers’ role in the asylum procedure is significant because they provide excellent role models with regard to the identity

of being a deaf person and a sign language user and are also great language teachers for deaf asylum seekers. Deaf volunteers also act as a bridge to the signing community of the host country. Formal instruction in FinSL was not given to all participants in this study, and without a fluent shared language and equal access to information on the asylum procedure, the result has been unequal positions for deaf asylum seekers as well as different challenges and outcomes.

The findings of this study also support the suggestion by others, such as Roberts, for “greater involvement in refugee issues by the disability movement” [17] (p. 943). Mirza has also suggested involving disability rights’ advocates more in disabled refugee issues, because those advocates can play an important role [54]. In Finland, this action would mean more involvement from the Finnish deaf community in improving the Finnish asylum system for deaf asylum seekers.

One of the main challenges of the asylum procedure is linguistic-based, because the language of asylum includes many difficult terms that are not easy to translate into IS or into gestures. Some issues may, therefore, be hard for deaf asylum seekers to understand. Those participants who received formal FinSL instruction observed a positive effect on their well-being, and they began to use FinSL as their new language because they noticed that it enhanced their ability to communicate and understand a wide range of issues. Receiving early FinSL teaching in the asylum procedure may not lead to a positive decision, but it leads to more fairness and gives deaf asylum seekers the opportunity to state their own claims better and more clearly.

We should consider the power of using a language in the context of the asylum procedure. Despite the provisions called for in sections 15 and 27 of the Finnish Act on the Reception of Persons Applying for International Protection and on the Identification of and Assistance to Victims of trafficking in Human Beings (746/2011), deaf asylum seekers have not received information and interpreting services in their primary and most used language, Arab Sign. Deaf asylum seekers in this study were emergent readers and among the documents examined for this study, the majority were written in Finnish and translated into FinSL and IS by sign language interpreters and deaf volunteers, including myself. Both of those language and communication strategies are unfamiliar to deaf asylum seekers, but they have no choice but to accept the situation and the use of language. In this study, deaf asylum seekers have gone through different interviews, including the most significant interview in the whole asylum procedure, the asylum hearing. In informal situations, deaf asylum seekers’ multimodal and multilingual communication seems to be generally accepted and useful. However, in the asylum procedure, it is important to have the opportunity to fully understand what is being said and to use the language one knows best so that others, such as sign language interpreters, can understand the person correctly. The language and communication use with deaf asylum seekers during the asylum procedure must also be discussed and critiqued, because during such a procedure, everything must be said and understood correctly. There should not be room for misunderstandings that lead to poor decisions. Further research is needed to understand how to best maximize communication and minimize misunderstanding in this high-stakes context.

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