

Title: Coping with immigration detention: Social identities as cures and curses

Abstract

Over 29,000 foreign nationals are detained yearly in British Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs) for undefined periods. This study investigated the role played by social identities in the way detainees are affected by, make sense of, and deal with detention. An opportunity sample of 40 detainees were interviewed on topics including support, identity, and well-being, and data were analysed using theoretical thematic analysis. Participants struggled with loss of social networks, loss of rights, loss of agency and joining a stigmatised group. Social identities guided exchange of support, aided meaning-making, and mitigated distrust, serving as 'Social Cures'. However, shared identities could also be sources of burden, ostracism, and distress, serving as 'Social Curses'. Inability to maintain existing identities or create new ones fuelled feelings of isolation. Participants also reported rejection/avoidance of social identities to maximise their benefits. This study is the first to apply the Social Identity Approach to the experience of immigration detention.

Keywords: social identities, Social Cure, Social Curse, common-fate, coping, immigration detention

Introduction

The context of detention

There are an estimated 244 million immigrants worldwide (UNFPA, 2015), many of whom are undocumented (PROCON, 2010). In 2017 alone, over 29,000 undocumented migrants were detained in one of 10 UK Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs) for a potentially unlimited time while awaiting deportation or release (Home Office, 2018; Bosworth, 2014). Average detention time is over three months, ranging from one day to a few years, with the average detainee spending eight years living in the UK before detention (Bosworth & Kellezi, 2012; 2015).

Pre-detention, the experience of migration itself increases exposure to different stressors such as stigmatisation in the host country, and loss of social support due to relocating to a new country (Bhugra, 2004). Undocumented migrants are additionally vulnerable due to their reduced access to employment and state support. Some are destitute (Magalhaes, Carrasco, & Gastaldo, 2010).

Once detained, women and men face new challenges including uncertainty about their immigration status, boredom, loss of agency and control, increased ill-health and loss of social ties developed in the host country, all of which make the detention experience very distressing (Bosworth & Kellezi, 2013; 2014; Steel et al.2006; McLaughlin & Warin, 2008; Robjant, Hassan & Katona, 2009). We know that most detainees experience uncertainty about the future (Bosworth & Kellezi, 2017a). Trust inside detention centres is difficult to establish, as detainees feel they are under constant scrutiny from immigration officials trying to facilitate their deportation (Bosworth & Kellezi, 2017a). Becoming a detainee typically involves sudden separation from existing social networks and adaptation to a new social environment. Yet, we do not know how detainees manage this separation and adapt to this

new social environment. Researchers currently have limited access to IRCs (Bosworth & Kellezi, 2017a; 2017b). As a result, little is known about the role of social processes during the transition into confinement, nor how separation from existing support networks affects people's abilities to make sense of and cope with detention. Some understanding of these strategies can be inferred from existing research in other sites like prison, where people also have to deal with confinement and separation from social ties (see, for classic accounts, Sykes, 1958, Goffman, 1961; or, more recently, Crewe, 2009).

In their research, Jones and Schmidt (2000) found that first time inmates adapt to confinement through identity management: they relinquish old identities and adopt ones more compatible with confinement. Prisoners utilise other inmates to actively make sense of problematic issues (e.g., violence), and rely on outside social support such as family, even as incarceration makes such links difficult to maintain. Ultimately, these findings suggest that incarceration results in significant change to social relationships, yet the authors' analysis is among the few prison studies that go beyond the interpersonal perspective. An interpersonal perspective obscures the fact that confinement can be profoundly social: groups shape the way we understand and deal with transition and distress (Jetten et al., 2017).

In addition, prisons are different from detentions so prison research has limited value for understanding detention. Unlike detainees, most prisoners know the length of their imprisonment¹. Other than those who claim to have been wrongfully convicted, they know that their confinement is a consequence of criminal activity. Other than foreigner nationals, prisoners are also not threatened with deportation at end of their sentence (Bosworth, 2014). These features make detention a unique context of studying ways people deal with uncertainty, perceived illegitimacy and threat of negative outcome in addition to features shared with imprisonment.

The present study employs the social identity approach (SIA; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1985) to explore group processes not previously studied in the detention context through examining the experiences of detainees. Existing SIA research evidences how group memberships can help individuals to make sense of and cope with stressful life transitions and experimentally-generated confinement (e.g., Haslam & Reicher, 2006). As such, it can transform our understanding of detainees' experiences by enabling a group-level analysis of how individuals make sense of, and cope with transition into confinement, whilst also considering the impact of the institutional context (Reicher, 2004).

The Social Identity Approach

The SIA proposes that we belong to multiple social groups which influence the way we feel, think, and behave (Tajfel, 1981). As such, when a person identifies with a social group, their sense of belonging to the group has implications for their appraisal of the stressfulness of the situation, of their ability to deal with the situation using internal resources (coping) and external recourses (social support), and their wellbeing (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For example, life events are experienced as more traumatic when individuals perceive that their experiences violate group norms (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012) and less traumatic when they affirm group norms (Kellezi, Reicher & Cassidy, 2009). Ingroup reassurance leads to appraisals of a challenging task as less challenging than outgroup reassurance does (Haslam, Jetten, O'Brien, & Jacobs, 2004) and strong group identification is also associated with higher levels of perceived social support (Haslam, O'Brien, Jetten, Vormedal, & Penna, 2005). Moreover, needy individuals are more likely to receive assistance if they are perceived as ingroup members (Levine, Prosser, Evans, & Reicher, 2005). This is important, since the reduction in stress experienced when one is confident that social support will be forthcoming,

is one of the key mediators of the group identification/well-being relationship, thereby turning social identities into Social Cures (Jetten, Haslam, & Haslam, 2012).

Given the new challenges undocumented migrants face when they are detained (e.g. uncertainty, loss of social contact) it is important to understand how such social identity resources defined by SIA impact upon appraisal, coping, and support giving and receiving within this context. We next discuss some of the main challenges detainees face that could shape processes of appraisal, coping, and support in detention and show how SIA research can promote understanding of such processes.

Confinement as Identity Transition and Separation

As they enter detention, detainees are separated from their social network, and have to adapt to a new social environment while experiencing high levels of distress (Bosworth & Kellezi, 2017a, 2015). This can lead to fundamental changes in the different group memberships detainees have.

SIA research has shown that developing new identities and identifying with multiple social groups is beneficial during distressing and transition times because multiple groups provide different types of social support and continuing social support if one group is lost (Sani, Madhok, Norbury, Dugard, & Wakefield, 2015). Multiple identifications also provide a sense of continuity which could be beneficial for detainees when transitioning into confinement.

For example, transition (e.g., retiring) can reduce well-being due to loss of group memberships, but adapting to new identities and maintaining existing ones provides identity networks that can restore well-being (processes outlined in the Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC); Iyer, Jetten, Tsivrikos, Postmes & Haslam, 2009; Steffens, Cruwys, Haslam, Jetten & Haslam, 2016). While these benefits occur when individuals

identify with positively-valued new identities (e.g., student), they may be absent if the new identity is incompatible with the individual's existent identities (Seymour-Smith, Cruwys, Haslam, & Brodribb, 2016). This is likely to be the case for detainees as they lose their community, professional or caring roles (Bosworth & Kellezi, 2014), to become 'detained persons' (HO, 2001).

Detainees are also separated from their families as they enter confinement and SIA research shows that family identification can be detrimental for the individual if their ability to maintain contact is compromised (Sani, Herrera, Wakefield, Boroch, & Gulyas, 2012).

Stigmatised Identity

Once detained, detainees have to adapt to new status: that of being unwanted (liable for removal/deportation), untrusted (detained as opposed to living in the community while their case is considered) and under current system unable to obtain many human rights including trusting legal support (Bosworth, 2014). As such, they struggle to trust and interact with centre staff and HO officials (Bosworth & Kellezi, 2017a). Social identity theorising can shed light on how individuals are impacted by their stigmatised identities. For instance, members of certain rejected groups (e.g., established minorities) tend to embrace that identity strongly (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey 1999; Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt & Spears 2001) and can consequently benefit from group identification. Branscombe et al. (1999) argue that this identification can be motivated by the need to belong, and can foster feelings of illegitimacy towards discrimination experiences, thereby creating a desire to address this perceived injustice. This desire will ultimately shape interactions with the majority group. However, it is not clear if such benefits can be derived from the recently-established temporary detainee group, with limited rights and resources for collective action.

Coping with Loss of Agency and Control as a Group Member

Another essential change experienced during detention is loss of agency regarding daily life decisions (e.g., when to sleep), and ability to plan one's own future (Kellezi & Bosworth, 2017). We can draw some understanding of social processes in such conditions from two strands of SIA research: explorations of emergency situations (where sense of control is lost), and the BBC Prison Study (the primary exploration of social identity processes within confinement).

Concerning the former, survivors of the 2005 London bombing displayed what Drury, Cocking, and Reicher (2009) labelled 'collective resilience'. Their sense of 'common-fate' shifted categorisation from the individual-level to the group-level. This in turn promoted selfless acts of solidarity, thereby highlighting the vital resources group identification can provide during extreme life events. Similarly, Alfarhli and Drury, (2018) in their research with refugees found that a shared common fate led to shared identities and social support despite the stigmatised status and distress of the situations. The shared fate of being detained without limit could foster solidarity inside detention.

Concerning the latter, the BBC Prison Study investigated the behaviour of unequal-status groups when exposed to stressors within a closed environment (Haslam & Reicher, 2006). Fifteen males were randomly assigned to prisoner (low-status) and guard (high-status) roles for eight days in a simulated prison and were introduced to potential cognitive alternatives to their current illegitimate status by means of experimental manipulation. The study demonstrated the benefits of social identification: strong group identification (among prisoners) was associated with higher intragroup support, trust, and collaboration, better coping, and lower burnout (Haslam & Reicher, 2006). Conversely, lower levels of identification with a social group (among guards) led to avoidance responses, strategies of

individual mobility, higher insecurity, negativity, and inability to cope effectively with stressors (Haslam & Reicher, 2006). Ultimately, Haslam and Reicher celebrate the power of groups, and highlight how groups can enable their members to cope collectively with stress. However, it is not clear whether these findings apply to a real-life confinement context such as detention. Detainees have no opportunities to cross group boundaries, have limited cognitive alternatives to deal with inequalities (both features of the BBC Prison Study paradigm) whilst their actions could have real life consequences by being perceived as non-compliant with immigration rules. This and other distinctions with prison outlined earlier, make their experience unique, and as-yet unexplored within the SIA.

The Present Study

The SIA research outlined above can shed light on the group-related dimensions of detention: notably that identifying as a detainee might be a ‘double-edged sword’ that confers social support whilst also promoting the negative feelings of belonging to a stigmatised identity. On the other hand, lack of social relationships could foster poor support and coping at a time of transition, loss of agency and high distress. Despite these potentially life-changing impacts, IRCs remain poorly understood institutions, and detainees’ accounts are rarely explored. This study will use the SIA to explore the role of group processes in how detainees in UK IRCs are affected by, make sense of, and cope with confinement. Researching this population offers unique opportunities for understanding the complex nature of the social psychological mechanisms at play within such institutions, as well as shedding light on transition, loss of agency, experiences of feeling discriminated against and distress. The high levels of distress we identified in our previous research (Bosworth & Kellezi, 2015) were also found problematic by HO representatives, leading to discussions and the present study. More specifically this study will investigate the following questions:

1. What are the key social identity challenges affecting detainees inside detention?
2. How do social identity processes structure the ways in which detainees make sense of (appraise) and cope with detention?

Method

This study was informed by a larger programme of research on quality of life inside UK IRCs (Bosworth 2014; Bosworth & Kellezi, 2015). This work began in 2009, is being conducted by two of the authors, and has been permitted by Home Office (HO) officials.

There are several methodological and ethical challenges in doing research with this population.ⁱⁱ Detainees experience an intersection of vulnerabilities (Liamputtong, 2006) due to their incarcerated status and socio-economic disadvantage of being undocumented (Birman, 2005). They often spend years avoiding authorities, making them a hard-to-reach population (Liamputtong, 2006) outside and inside detention. Moreover, the topics explored in this research are sensitive: participants refer to personal experiences under conditions of confinement (Farrant, 2014). This required several important considerations following BPS and APA ethical guidelines (APA, 2017; BPS, 2018)ⁱⁱⁱ.

A qualitative design using semi-structured interviews was chosen to explore participants' own experiences of identity challenges, and the role of social identity processes in making sense of and coping with detention. The interviews were conducted in private by the first author who has in-depth knowledge of IRCs and 7 years' experience researching this population. The diversity of the population also favoured a qualitative approach: detainees come from a variety of countries and cultures, were likely to have experienced numerous pathways into migration and detention, and likely not to have English as their first language. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to answer questions on their own terms,

giving them control over the discussion. Names, nationalities, reasons for detention, immigration status, and other identifiable information was not requested to build trust and distance the interview from any formal immigration interviews (Bosworth & Kellezi, 2017a). However, most participants volunteered the information.

Participants were invited to take part in the study and talk about ‘their knowledge and awareness of services supporting detainees with mental health problems’ using three recruitment strategies (see Box 1) and all volunteers were interviewed. All participants explicitly indicated their willingness to participate to the first author after reading the Participant Information Sheet or having it read to them, being reminded of their rights, and that participation would not impact their case. Participants were informed that the anonymised findings would be reported to the HO and IRCs and published in journals. One participant required further reassurance after participating, but ultimately chose not to withdraw explaining that he “believed he had a duty to make others aware of what it feels like to be detained without limit”. Detainees’ main motivations for being interviewed were either this sense of duty or the desire to unburden themselves by sharing their story with an outsider (Bosworth & Kellezi, 2017a).

Participants

The study took place in two UK IRCs (one male-only and one female-only) during June 2016 and February 2017. Thirty-nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 detainees (participant summary characteristics are presented in Table 1 and individual descriptions in Table 2). Participants were provided a £5 voucher/phone credit for their participation. The interview topics included questions on life before detention; engagement with and experiences of health services; sources of support including institutional and other support; cultural understandings of mental health; ways of coping with detention; and nature of

relationships with other detainees and staff (see Table 3 for example questions). Topics were developed from thematic coding of a larger dataset of interviews, focus-groups, and ethnographic notes from 250 detainees and staff, collected for a project investigating quality of life in detention (Bosworth, 2014).

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The physical presence of the researcher in the IRCs and regime restrictions dictated interview length and number. The analysis followed a contextualist approach which aims to account for the wider context, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2012; 2013), theoretically driven by the SIA. This approach was chosen to provide an understanding of group-based meaning-making and coping strategies in a context of transition, confinement, stigmatisation, and loss of agency. Coding (and subsequent theme creation) was intended to capture important patterns of meaning related to the research questions.

The whole dataset was coded, but subsequent analysis focused on aspects of the data corpus that had potential relevance to the research questions (all instances where participants discussed group processes of how they were affected by, coped with, and made sense of detention). This included data clearly indicating patterns outlined in previous theory (deductive approach; such as maintaining existing identities in times of transition), or suggested by the participants (inductive approach; such as deciding who to trust based on their prior identities).

Following a second reading of each transcript (familiarisation state) combined with listening to the recordings, the first authors noted initial descriptions and interpretations of each meaningful section of the interview data.

These descriptions and interpretations, combined with post-interview notes, were used by the first author to generate and label codes using NVivo software. The coding stage focussed on explicit discussion of social identity processes (semantic coding; e.g. family contact), but also engaged in more implicit SIA-informed data interpretation (e.g., in relation to common fate).

Codes were categorised, sorted, and resorted, into possible themes (theme searching stage) through exploration and interrogation of the relationships between each of the codes producing a clustering of codes that shared similar meaning. The research team then explored different ways they could be combined to capture patterns of meaning most effectively. This iterative process established a series of useful and meaningful themes, and different levels of themes. For example, codes relating to religion, family contact, isolation, and support from outside friends were combined to form the theme ‘Existing social identities as a coping strategy’. This was later labelled: ‘Existing identities as a means of appraisal and coping with detention’, as further analysis established that existing identities served both functions. The prevalence of each theme was noted by recording how many transcripts it appeared in. Identified themes were reviewed (theme reviewing stage) to establish their:

- independence (whether each theme providing a unique and important answer to the research question, or contained overlap);
- coherence (if themes fit together to provide a coherent overall analysis, and are organised optimally);
- and whether they accurately represented the meanings present in the whole data-set: if themes are central to the data corpus, and where they were placed within the thematic structure (themes, subthemes, overarching themes, or surplus to the analysis).

This last stage was carried out on the transcripts by the lead author, and then discussed with three other team members using a subset of 23% of the data (defining and naming themes stage). This enabled: a) a comparison of categories identified by the different team members; b) eventual agreement on the main themes; and c) eventual agreement on explanations of and interrelationships between the identified themes, paying attention to negative cases and substantiation (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011) and d) agreeing on final report.

Extracts from the interviews are presented using pseudonyms and indicating omitted lines with ellipsis [...]. Three main themes were identified (see Table 4).

Results

Theme 1: Key Identity Challenges and Losses Affecting Detainees

The first theme involves the main social identity challenges and losses affecting the detainees while they transition into and try to cope with confinement. The experience of confinement was articulated across all participants as being highly challenging. Three key social identity challenges and losses were identified: 1) loss of social networks both in terms of temporary separation and fear of permanent separation following deportation; 2) loss of rights and freedoms in a context of perceived illegitimacy, intergroup distrust, and discrimination; 3) loss of agency and control in the intergroup context.

1.1. Loss of social networks and separation

One of the key challenges of detention is separation from important others who can be essential sources of support at such a difficult time:

Extract 1:

My family is not here (...) so I feel lonely all the time. It's like every day is the same thing; nothing change. The same routine. So, you will be feeling lonely, definitely lonely [...] everything in my life now is just dark; there's no light. (Albert).

Isolation from his family has created a cycle of monotonous boredom, lack of social support, and desperate loneliness that contribute to his feelings of darkness. Losing a key social identity, such as the family, adds to the distress and negative appraisal of detention as the participants suffer the pain of forced separation and fear permanent loss of a valuable group membership through deportation. Prison research has also evidenced that family separation contributes to physical and mental decline (Maschi, Viola, Morgen, & Lindsay, 2015). In addition, whether through detention or deportation, these individuals are severed from important social networks that can help them cope with difficult circumstances, a process at the core of the Social Cure perspective (Jetten, Haslam, Cruwys, Greenaway, Haslam & Steffens, 2017). Detainees' experience of isolation, loneliness, boredom and fear of losing valuable social networks, evidences the inherent value of social identities and their role as a resource in times of stress (Haslam et al., 2005; Kellezi et al., 2009) as well as the negative impact of losing valuable group memberships (Haslam et al., 2008).

1.2. Loss of rights and illegitimacy of current status

At the core of the detainee experience was also the belief that detention was illegitimate, unfair, and unjust. This experience was underpinned by their forced categorisation as members of a devalued and disempowered minority group (i.e., undocumented migrants):

Extract 2:

So it's ridiculous, I've been locked up for almost a year. My whole twenty-fifth year been spent behind bars, locked up for nothing. [...] I always say, if somebody is in your country doing bad, by all means get rid of them; try get rid of them... I never came here illegally. (David)

David (like all the participants) defines detention as unfairly punitive and illegitimate: his 'legal' behaviour has led to UK authorities stealing his time, making the whole experience profoundly unjust. Whilst he recognises that migrants 'doing bad' should justifiably be gotten 'rid of', he distances himself from what he considers to be an enforced and unfair categorisation into this group. This unfairness is at the core of David's appraisal of the situation. Thus, being detained represents societal exclusion, and the imposition of a stigmatised detainee identity rather than treatment based on individual circumstances and worth. Social exclusion has been previously linked to poor mental health and even suicide (Williams, Forgas, van Hippel, & Zadro, 2005) which David and a few other participants also reported. The experience of stigmatisation perceived as illegitimate has been shown to have implications for wellbeing (Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes & Garcia, 2014) but also hostility and mistrusts towards the dominant group (Branscombe et al, 1999). This preoccupation with mistrust of authorities becomes more apparent in detention when participants discuss the loss of their right to fair treatment. Many detainees considered HO procedural decisions to be arbitrary, reinforcing their position as part of a powerless, devalued, and marginalised group:

Extract 3

It's a Home Office playground. It's like they never run out of people. They release them, two weeks – come back in. Bam, bam, bam, bam, go for bail again. This place, it's like tennis. One is kicking it from here, the other one's kicking it from there. And you happen to be that ball, you're just swinging, you don't know which side you're landing in. [...] This is what happen when you say there is no time limit. This is the inevitable. This is what should everyone expect. Because you just told the person who had the power, 'There is no limit to your power'. (Ajani)

Ajani describes the frustration he (and most others) experience due to what he perceives as authorities' arbitrary decision-making and power over them. This perceived power imbalance exacerbates this frustration: to Ajani (and many others), the authorities wield their power inhumanely, discriminating against detainees and playing with them like objects ('*tennis ball*'). It is this dehumanised status that ultimately leads to feelings of rejection, unworthiness, and helplessness, demonstrating the impact of these intergroup dynamics on detainees' experiences and appraisal of their situation. Experience of discrimination based on group identity has been shown to have negative implications in terms of how stigmatised groups cope with discrimination (e.g. disengaging with services provided by the dominant groups) (Stevenson, McNamara & Muldoon, 2014).

A central feature of their powerlessness related to the indefinite nature of detention. For Ajani, a long-time detainee, the absence of a limit to detention facilitates potentially endless power for those in charge. This perceived purposeful denial of rights (again, based on their specific 'illegal' status) differentiates detainees from prisoners^{iv}, making the detention

experience unique. These perceptions of injustice and power are important for understanding the ways detainees cope with detention. Perception of injustice has also implications for collective action (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008) and collective efficacy (Drury & Reicher, 2005). Thus here, identity is implicated in the experience of having the ‘*illegal*’ migrant categorisation foisted upon them as they enter detention, distrust of authority, and lack of power which accompanies that categorisation shaping the appraisal of their situation. The premise that this categorisation with its distinctive norms and values will have important implications for group members is at the core of SIA (Turner, 1985).

1.3. Loss of agency and control

On the other hand, detention is defined by physical isolation and forced physical presence of others, which seems to contribute to sense of loss of control and fear.

Extract 4:

Nine o'clock everywhere is locked up, it's like you are in a complete cage. You can't do much for yourself, you can't do anything. That time, that period from 9 o'clock [pm] to 9 am is very, very difficult, [...] you can't sleep and then at times where you hear people they are screaming and screaming, it's like the whole thing scares you. ... you could be the next one down the line. (Celeste)

Celeste's account reveals a loss of self-determination, lack of connection to those around her, and loss of her own humanity, as one is incapable of action and in a ‘*complete cage*’ (used for animals, not humans), thereby denying detainees of what Haslam, Loughnan, Kashima, and

Bain (2009) define as an essential element of human nature: agency. For Celeste, (and many others) this sense of being thrust into a new social context where one is excluded, isolated, and uncertain of one's own position and fate (*'next one down the line'*) is essential to the detention experience. This is exacerbated by observing the distress of fellow detainees. Celeste, and other participants describe the fear they experience as they witness other detainees being forcibly removed, reminding them of their common fate. Here, social identities shape the appraisal of the experience through the additional distress of other's sharing a common fate providing a social dimension to the loss of agency and control that comes with confinement. Loss of agency and control here is also experienced as purposeful in the intergroup context of lack of power and legitimacy. Reicher and Haslam (2006) also argue for the distinction between individual and social (collective) agency that comes from shared identity and goals and the implications of this later for wellbeing and collective action.

These accounts speak to the role of social identity in shaping detainees' experiences of detention through social isolation, fear, discrimination, trust and loss of agency. Similar feelings of inequality and illegitimacy were reported by Haslam and Reicher's (2006) BBC Prison Study participants. However, detainees face what they perceive as unmitigated control by the authorities: they stand to lose valuable social connections through deportation. Resultantly, they experienced a very real sense of illegitimacy, fear, isolation, and distress while having no opportunities for mobility or empowerment. Nonetheless, detainees must find ways to make sense of and cope with detention. Under such conditions, turning towards others (whether through existing social ties outside detention or new group memberships) is one of the few available coping resources in this context. We turn next to the ways social identities allowed detainees to cope with the stress of confinement.

Theme 2: Existing identities as a means of making sense and coping with detention

Around half of the participants chose to rely on family and friends (if available) for emotional, informational, and financial support. This is in line with previous research which has found that in times of transition and distress, maintaining group-based social ties can foster social support and a sense of consistency (Iyer et al., 2009; Steffens et al., 2016).

2.1. Existing social identities as source of support, distraction, and a way to deal with distress

Relying on existing social networks was a valuable source of support. For detainees like Eva, this support came in the form of visits or phone calls:

Extract 5

Every week I have people coming to visit, mainly from our church so that keeps my mind off a lot. I always have someone on the other end of the phone you know just ringing so every time I start to think too much my phone rings or I can pick up the phone and say hello to someone. (Eva)

Eva describes how weekly visits ‘*keep her mind off*’ her worries and distracts her when times are difficult. This concurs with Social Cure research: important groups (the church in Eva’s case) provide support in times of distress (Haslam et al., 2005; Levine, et al., 2005; Sani et al., 2015), in part through the perception that assistance will be there in times of need (‘*I always have someone on the other end of the phone*’) (Sani, et al. 2012; Miller, Wakefield, & Sani, 2015).

There was another reason why detainees preferred to turn towards existing relationships. Several participants described how their constant distress meant they found relationship

formation with other detainees quite difficult, preferring to turn to their pre-existing social networks for supports:

Extract 6

Interviewer: How do you find talking to other women? Is it helpful or is it just for passing the time?

Tila: It's just to pass the time [...] I think this time I came inside here, [...] you just touch that button in my head and I get pissed off so easily but I walk away from it [talking to other detainees] I find myself walk away from it and call my husband at the same time and then he will talk to me and talk to me until everything - I feel alright and that's it.

By turning to her family members (Tila talks about her husband and daughters) instead of other detainees, Tila maintains distance from the environment in which she and other detainees find themselves. Indeed, the only way that some detainees coped with detention was by maintaining regular contact with external individuals and groups, such as family. These findings differ from Drury and colleagues' (2009, 2015) which show that during crises people become united by a common fate. We shall address common fate in Theme 3, but what Tila's account points out is that when things become difficult, some detainees walk away from those with whom they share a common fate. Indeed, detainees may only be turned to for a more superficial type of relationship: '*passing time*'. Social identities can also function at a more abstract level, whereby existing identities (e.g., religious identity) are enacted with new group members (see Online Supplement 1).

2.2. Existing social identities as sources of burden or rejection

Whilst existing social identities were often curative, they were experienced negatively in some cases. Detainees were often deeply concerned about the impact of their detention on their outside social groups. Many felt afraid of burdening their families and friends, thus adding to their distress due to having to protect their loved ones from their detention experiences. This often led to loss of this vital source of social support, and stronger feelings of isolation:

Extract 7

Eduardo: It is too much stress, too much things. My family say I am alright and I have to say I am alright, when I am not.

Interviewer: Why do you do that?

Eduardo: How can I put them to suffer like me? How can I tell them I am not alright when they got to suffer the same as me? I have to suffer on my own because I know I have too much love from them, for me.

Eduardo, like many others, chose to isolate himself and suffer alone rather than add to others' burdens. For detainees, their groups' interactions have become difficult (a Social Curse; Kellezi & Reicher, 2012), because they carry guilt and worry about causing pain to important group members (note Eduardo's repetition of word 'suffer'). This has consequences for detainees' help-seeking, but it also reveals the meaning they attribute to their detention experience: as detrimental to themselves and others. The examples above describe choices of

self-isolation and self-censorship for fear of causing harm to loved ones, but intragroup processes can also be harmful when the group turns against the individual, as we will explore next.

There were a few occasions where members of detainee's existing social groups reacted negatively towards them, another example of Social Curse processes (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012), whereby support is denied due to one's own perceived responsibility for one's fate. Alecia, for example, struggled with the 'loss of face' involved with being detained, and had faced rejection and disapproval when asking for help from her friends and extended family. They perceived her life choices as having led to her current situation, making her ultimately responsible, and thus unable to ask them for help. This exacerbated her isolation from her outside social world:

Extract 8

Immediately when you say your visa is in trouble [...] [they say] 'no no we are honest people' they don't even call me back they don't even care about how you are, where you are. [...] I just tried to talk to them nicely but still I stopped even talking to people now because it put me, the family, people immediately talk about, because of my background, 'Why don't you get married? We've told you so many times you are going to suffer', [...] I don't want to show them I'm a failure. (Alecia)

Alecia describes her family's rejection of her through their declaration of themselves as 'honest people', in contrast with Alecia's perceived deceitfulness and norm-breaking, such as her refusal to get married. This sense of blame and rejection has led to Alecia's family severing contact with her and denying her social support, even when she 'tried to talk to them

nicely'. Kellezi and Reicher (2014) argue that, in traditional societies, women like Alicia are expected to depend on male family members, and this further disadvantages them when coping with rejection. For detainees who faced destitution upon release or deportation, the stigmatisation and rejection that comes with being detained could significantly impact their ability to survive, whether in their host country without the right to work, or back in their home country. Throughout their detention, detainees had to decide how to relate to their existing social groups and had to make important decisions such as when to ask for group support or how to deal with the group's disapproval at their being part of a stigmatised social category: a detainee.

Theme 3: Emergent identities as a means of making sense and coping with detention

The importance of social identity as a means of coping with the detention experience was also evident in detainees' accounts of their relationships with newly-formed social groups. This was particularly, but not exclusively, in relation to the 'detainee identity'.

3.1. Detainee identity as a source of support and understanding

Physical separation from existing social groups (or lack of such resources in the first place), and the necessity to find ways to deal with detention, contributed towards the establishment of new detainee identities. Where formed (only for around half of the participants), detainee identities could provide many of the benefits of existing social identities whilst promoting shared understanding due to a sense of common fate. As such, for detainees who choose to identify with each-other, the group provided with much-needed support (often at a practical level), which would be hard to acquire from outside social networks. Participants reported costly practical support they had provided to others, such as sharing the few limited resources they had (e.g., money, cigarettes, or phone credits). Others made sure they brought food to

detainees who were too ill to go to the dining room. They also talked about engaging in shared bonding activities like cooking and socialising:

Extract 9

We are like a team. We laugh, we cry together [...]. Like last night, I just went in someone's room, she wasn't well, so in a way we just feel like, it's funny to say, but we feel like we are a family here. [...] Yeah, we just try to help each-other to support, support each-other, we don't even look at the race, at the colour, sometimes we, even the African ladies, they will just come in to see you sad, they will just come in without you knowing, they just drop you in their hand and start praying. And it's so amazing feeling you know to. We feel like we are blessed in a way. (Enam)

As Enam explains, the 'family' and 'team'-like relationships detainees build with each-other are based on a sense of mutual empathy and a willingness to provide help, care, and support, thereby evidencing recognisable elements of a shared identity (Levine et al., 2005). They share their distress ('cry together') which fosters solidarity, concern for others, and unity ('like we are family'), borne out of a shared fate (Drury, et al., 2015). Enam explains how this connection transcends differences like race and religion (her religion differs to her friends and the 'African ladies') and how the connection is so strong in some cases that they feel 'blessed in a way', despite (and because of) the circumstances in which they find themselves. This sense of shared identity means that the identity-based support received from fellow detainees is experienced as more legitimate and meaningful than any that could be obtained from an 'outside' source (Reicher, Cassidy, Wolpert, Hopkins, & Levine, 2006), and is more

likely to be accepted in the spirit in which it was intended (Levine et al., 2005) as illustrated by Albert:

Extract 10

Sometime, you know we don't want to speak to nobody outside. You want to speak to someone who is in the same situation as you. Because they can see, and they understand more than that person who is outside. A person who is outside don't know what's going on inside here. (Albert)

Albert describes a psychological bond between people who are sharing the same distressing experience, a 'common fate'. This sharing of experience allows the detainee to feel more understood '*because they can see, and they can understand*' what is going on inside detention. Albert believes the experience of detention is so extraordinary that only those who go through it can understand its impact or provide meaningful support. However, shared identities were not always beneficial for detainees, which rendered them less helpful or welcome under certain conditions.

3.2. Detainee identity as a source of distress and reminder of fate

Despite the positive value of identity-based social support highlighted above, the context of confinement and the process of exclusion (through deportation) challenges the detainee identity in several ways. Some participants described how they must manage interactions with other detainees to avoid jeopardising their case. For example, detainees must choose carefully who to interact with and when to avoid such interactions impacting negatively on their case (see Celeste's account in Online Supplement 1).

Others explained how identifying with fellow detainees can be problematic because group members may be deported at any time. Eva explains the value of supporting each-other, but that this is difficult to achieve when one must forge new relationships again and again:

Extract 11

I mean some of my friends, we came together, they gone so I've tried to join, you know, just talk to other people, which is difficult for me because even though I talk to other people I don't, I'm not very good with that first-time conversation kind of thing
(Eva)

Like Eva, most participants who had been detained for some time explained how painful it was to cope with the continuous and unpredictable shift of people, and how this undermined group bonds. Instead of providing a sense of continuity, social identities in this case are threatened by lack of continuity and uncertainty. This contributes to the dissolving of group bonds which, when combined with distrust and distress, lead to the detainee identity becoming threatened and less useful. Ongoing change and the loss of ties over time creates further isolation as individuals see their fate as different from others, and thus the maintenance of common fate is stifled.

The other challenge to common fate is being unable to provide an empathetic response to others' distress. Almost all participants described situations where they were unable to cope emotionally with another's distress, leading to them avoiding the distressed individual. As Aurelia simply puts it, "[I] can't take their problems, because I have so much myself". It was this experience of vicarious trauma that Aisha described as one of the most difficult aspects of detention:

Extract 12

Esmir: It's so upsetting, so upsetting. Was it last month or so they took two ladies from the same room, they were roommates from Jamaica, [...] it was so upsetting like they closed everywhere and you could hear her scream because when they were passing I saw, I was just looking, the lady was just here screaming at the top of her lungs [...]. it is so upsetting, [...] it doesn't matter where the person is coming from, it is upsetting. And it's an inhumane way to treat a person, human being, it's not right, it's not right. Especially women,

Interviewer: What do you think is specific about women?

Esmir: Women are delicate even though we are trying to be like, even though we are trying to be equal to men but still. (...) all these men coming to grab one women, no it's not right.

Witnessing desperation, deportation, loss of hope, or mental decline of others was at times too much to bear, serving as a reminder of one's own fate, especially when, as in the case of Esmir, this involves a feeling of shared identification as detainees, women, and fundamentally as human beings. The common fate which previous research has shown to contribute to a sense of unity and collaboration (Drury *et al.*, 2015) can have a negative impact on detainees (a Social Curse), as they are affected by suffering of others, and thus isolate themselves. These feelings of distress sometimes promoted strategic use of social identities and resistance to connections with others, which will be discussed in the final sections. Again, they point to mechanisms of Social Curse within the group, but in this case the curse is not only individual (as described by Kellezi & Reicher, 2012); it is spread across

the group and felt by most (if not all) group members, pushing them away from each-other, or as we will see in the next subtheme, becoming a barrier to group formation amongst those who share a common fate.

3.3. Distancing and rejection of detainee social identity

Some detainees coped with the burden of association by mixing with other detainees selectively rather than actively identifying with them as a group:

Extract 13

'Culturally I feel a bit isolated even though I'm a black girl I grew up here majority of them didn't and you get one or two people who are in the same situation as me but then again we're worlds apart [...] if a person wants to sit next to me and have a chat I can pretty much relate to a lot of stuff they're going through [...] sometimes you're talking all they talking about is immigration, oh yes I do know im in the same situation can we talk about something else. [...] I'm surrounded by a lot of black people and different nationalities and stuff it's just it's kind of its kind of kind of giving me a good understanding. (Maria)

What Maria describes is a complex process that some (especially long-term) detainees undergo as they try to deal with continuous struggles of confinement. At times she relates to a lot of what others are going through by sharing the same fate, and at other times she feels isolated or does not want to discuss the concern they share (immigration). The new shared identities with other people of her race are important as they provide her with a new

understanding of different cultures, but this is not something that she can relate to fully having grown up in the UK. Thus detainees, acknowledge the benefits and risks of interaction with other detainees, so they purposefully interact or avoid upsetting topics of discussing. At times, they reject the detainee identity:

Extract 14

'Cause I don't want to hang around the wing, it's too negative the vibes, very negative - people, they just talking about their problems. I got plenty myself. So I keep myself busy, you know [...] I do have friends, yeah. But it's acquaintance, you know. It's a place that friendship is, is something you can't take for granted. And it's not, I'm not looking here for friends; I'm just looking to get out of this place. I don't have time for friends, I just keep myself in a bubble. (Carlos)

By talking about how he avoided others' distress, Carlos also highlights the fragility of group membership: a situation where the sense of common fate is not strong enough for social support to occur and he resists adapting a shared detainee identity. This *'keeping away from others'* is like what Frankl (2004) (although in very different circumstances) defines as a necessity of confinement: *'The prisoner craves to be alone with himself and his thoughts. He yearned for privacy and solitude'* (p. 41). Frankl argues that this act of choice gives people agency; a strategy of self-preservation. By choosing the manner and quality of interaction with others, some detainees maintain agency, and purposefully move from group-based to individual coping strategies (and vice-versa).

As argued in Theme 1, the detainee category is stigmatised and associated with being unwanted and undeserving. While discussing the legitimacy of detention, some participants argued that there are different categories of detainees, and that some of these categories were more ‘deserving of detention’ than others. Categorising in this way encouraged participants to actively resist self-identifying as a detainee, since doing this provided a way to distance oneself from a group considered to be comprised of criminals (i.e., individuals detained because they have served prison time), or ‘fraudulent’ asylum seekers, and the pain and shame that comes with this negative categorisation:

Extract 15:

‘I’m not the person who going to run from them, I’m not illegal person. They should see the file of the person, they should know how to treat everyone different. It’s not like same category, same things to treat everyone because you are a different person, I’m a different person’. (Edith)

This shift in categorisation from the more inclusive and superordinate detainee identity where they, in Alicia’s words (extract 11) ‘*are like a family*’, towards more exclusive and subordinate detainee sub-group identities (deserving versus. underserving) led to divisions and conflicts, and ultimately poorer adaptation to life in detention. These processes of self-distancing (refusing identification) could be guided by the guilt and shame of belonging to a devalued and low-status group (Tangney, Stuewig, Hafez, 2011) or could be a coping mechanism resulting from ‘just world’ beliefs where ‘undeserving detainees are those who have done bad’ (Furnham, 2003). For these detainees, the goal of leaving detention was prioritised over forming relationships with other detainees. It is possible that this process of

identity rejection or isolation from others (at times through dis-identification) proves to be a useful strategy for long-term detainees (detained for longer usually because of their stronger ties to the UK), or those who can maintain membership of other (less stigmatised) identities. Longer-term detainees often became involved in the running of the centre as peer supporters, paid workers, or activity staff supporters, a strategy closer to individual mobility, despite the stable, illegitimate, and impermeable group boundaries within the detention system. Tajfel (1981) argues that when group boundaries are perceived as permeable individuals are likely to deal with inequalities by escaping the group, but when the boundaries are perceived as impermeable the only options available lie in group action. However, these job-roles (i.e. peer supporter) allow long-term detainees to develop an individual strategy whereby boundaries remain impermeable (i.e., they remain detainees), but they perceive their position in a different and more positive light (akin to a cognitive alternative, where one can gain a sense of agency and control). This can alter their experiences (and perception) of confinement for the better.

The extent to which detainees relied on members of new or existing identities for support was therefore continuously changing. Those who coped successfully with detention could adapt to and rely on different sources of identity-related support at appropriate and useful times.

Those who were unable to create or maintain existing identities lost valuable support contexts, and this had implications for well-being, akin to processes observed in Haslam and Reicher's (2006) BBC Prison Experiment. Moreover, for some, individual mobility was deemed to be the most successful survival strategy, especially in the long-term.

Discussion

Summary of the findings

Experience of Detention

In Theme 1, participants described the experience of detention as chronically challenging, due to a combination of the loss of social networks (present and future threat), being part of an undeserving and unwanted minority which faces perceived illegitimacy and discrimination, and loss of agency and control at the personal and intergroup level. A key feature of the initial detainee transition related directly to their experiences of exclusion and isolation from their usual social world and sources of social support, with adverse consequences for the ability to make sense of and cope with detention (Kellezi & Reicher, 2014; McIntyre, Elahi, & Bentall, 2016). The challenges continued over time as detainees experienced perceived unfairness and faced the prospect of sudden deportation, making this a precarious (and ultimately unresolved) transition. Given such experiences, grasping onto existing group memberships and forging new ones become some of their only available coping strategies.

Existing Social Identities

Theme 2 suggests that existing identities can be an important source of support in line with Social Cure theorising. The temporary and unpredictable nature of relationships with fellow detainees meant that many detainees relied primarily on family and friends for this support. This is consistent with Herrera, Sani & Bowe's, (2011) suggestion that family identification provides the self-continuity essential for collective self-efficacy and well-being. Thus, in times of crisis and distrust, some detainees turn to solid relationships rooted in the past. Additionally (in the Online Supplement), existing identities that could be re-enacted inside detention (e.g. religious identity) helped detainees forge trusting relationships, endorse their

values of supporting others in need, and partake in more meaningful activities by attending group events like religious services. This reconnection with predictable and cherished social groups is an example of identities operating at a superordinate level, providing access to valuable reciprocal support and enhanced well-being. These findings are consistent with Social Cure theorising on the affective outcomes of social identification, and the notion that social identities provide a context for positive evaluations, cooperation, trust (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Tanis & Postmes, 2005; Voci, 2006), increased helping behaviour (Haslam, Reicher & Levine, 2012) and social support (Haslam et al., 2005; Sani et al., 2012).

In line with theorised Social Curse processes (e.g., Kellezi & Reicher, 2012) participants' accounts demonstrated that valued social identities were not always a source of positive social support. Within Theme 2, the evidence suggests that pre-existing social identities can be experienced negatively; for example, some participants were deeply concerned with the burden they were placing on their loved ones, which in turn led to further distress and withdrawal from a vital source of support. This is problematic in a context where detainees often need to rely on family and friends to help fight their case. Legal aid is very limited in IRCs, and most detainees had no right to public funds or work before detention or would have paid large sums to enter the UK illegally. Ultimately, Social Curse processes were instigated by others (through isolation and rejection) and participants themselves (to avoid inflicting pain on others).

Emerging Social Identities

As found in Theme 3, many detainees reported identification with an emergent detainee identity, which led to connection based on a sense of common fate. This shared experience enabled meaning-making to occur, as well as validation of detainees' emotions and experiences of distress. This promoted the development of legitimate, meaningful, and

supportive relationships. Research on emergencies (*e.g.*, Drury *et al.*, 2009; Drury *et al.*, 2015), which arguably share similar characteristics with the unexpected trauma of detention, also highlight a sense of togetherness emerging from common fate, which can promote cooperative solutions to distress. Togetherness and identification did therefore create vital social support for detainees who could overcome the stigmatised nature of the detainee identity. This is in line with Haslam and Reicher's (2006) BBC Prison Experiment, where strong identification amongst prisoners promoted the belief that they could deal with the stress of confinement through mutual support.

Identification with new and positive identities can be beneficial in times of stressful life transition, like recovery from substance misuse (Dingle, Stark, Cruwys, & Best, 2015), but marginalised social identities can reduce such benefits (Cruwys & Gunaseelan, 2016). The present research, however, shows that connection with a marginalised identity can still benefit group members. This is not the case for all, however. Long periods in detention, uncertainty, and distrust in the system diminished the potentially curative nature of the detainee identity for some. Indeed, such Social Cures could be turned into Social Curses in some circumstances, with shared common fate acting as a constant reminder of one's own uncertain future. In this way, witnessing the pain of fellow ingroup members created an additional psychological burden for detainees, a finding that goes beyond Drury *et al.*'s (2009, 2015) work by showing the conditions under which a sense of common fate fails to create or maintain social bonds, and the implications of this for one's coping abilities.

On the other hand, some detainees refused to identify with the detainee social group (for example, to avoid any negative impact on their case), and, like detainees who were unable to access social groups, they were especially isolated. Where possible, these detainees chose individual or interpersonal strategies, which meant they did not make use of potential

valuable resources. However, by allowing detainees to preserve their dignity and personal identity, such strategies do provide opportunities for agency. Others distanced themselves from the detainee identity due to their perceptions of their detention as being illegitimate and unfair. Ultimately, their unhappiness with being associated with a group they perceived as stigmatised (particularly in contexts where differentiations are made between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ detainees), led some to actively disengage from the detainee group.

Moreover, some participants (in Theme 2) described the shame associated with belonging into a devalued social group in contrast with their position within existing social networks. This devalued identity also had implications for their receipt of support from those outside detention. This supports previous Social Curse research showing that the shame associated with traumatic experience acts as a barrier to intragroup help-seeking and help-giving (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012, 2014).

Strengths and Limitations

The experiences of detainees are unique, allowing for a valuable real-life investigation of how social identity processes enable individuals to cope with social isolation, perceived injustice, and confinement. Although the participants were self-selected volunteers who had to overcome issues of trust and language to engage with the researcher, the diversity of their accounts and backgrounds, and the fact that this study was theoretically driven, and part of a larger, more extensive research program (using ethnography, interview, and survey methodologies), gives us confidence that we captured the complexities of the social identity dynamics inside detention. Nonetheless, future research (especially longitudinal) could focus on specific categories of detainees and specific periods of their detention experience, which

would help to support our findings regarding the varying strategies employed whilst adapting to detention and during longer-term residences.

It would also be useful to compare those newly arrived in the UK with long-term residents who might have potentially developed UK-based identification. Given the importance of group relationships for detainee ability to cope with detention, it is vital that structure and regime are managed in a way that allows supportive relationships to form between detainees, staff, and other relevant individuals.

Theoretical Implications

The present research outlines ways emerging, and existing social identities affect how detainees are impacted by, make sense of, and cope with detention. These processes are somewhat unique to the detention experience and they relate to the role of social identity in confinement (Haslam & Reicher, 2006) across two specific contexts: traumatic (e.g. Drury, et al., 2015; Kellezi, et al., 2009; Muldoon, Schmid, & Dowes, 2009), and within marginalised groups (e.g. Branscombe et al., 1999). The present research, through reference to a novel and socially significant real-world context, extends each of these aspects of the SIA. Specifically, the detention context involves ongoing threat, a disempowered low status group, and real-life situations of potentially unlimited confinement. Exploring this complex and multifaceted context provides a powerful use of the SIA, as well as in-depth investigation of the situations in which social identities can be a Social Cure (Haslam & Reicher, 2006; Haslam et al., 2012; Jetten et al., 2012) or a Social Curse (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012, 2014; Stevenson, et al., 2014). The present work supports and extends Drury et al.'s, (2009, 2015) research on emergencies by highlighting the values and limits of common fate. Issues with trust, lack of continuity of contact, and the uniqueness and unpredictability of each individual's fate means that enduring

social identities are hard to achieve, and makes common fate insufficient to allow the detainee identity to operate at the superordinate level. Enabling individuals to gain more control and agency over their lives could overcome many of the above limitations and encourage social identities to operate curatively within detention.

Moreover, the present research extends Haslam and Reicher's (2006) work on group processes and stress, by moving from a simulated (and temporary) prison to detention characterised by limitless confinement, unknown outcomes, and disruptions to existing social identities. Our research shows that turning to existing social identities, or developing new ones, in such contexts can still help people cope with detention. However, our research also shows that the responses of detainees are complex and diverse, defined by their marginalised status and fear of the future, and that under certain conditions relationships can turn into Social Curses. More broadly, these findings could shed light on how social identity mechanisms affect people's ability to cope with unpredictable and serious life changes like chronic illness or prison remand.

The present research supports work on the negative impact of outgroup rejection, here in the form of denial of rights and deportation threat. Whilst many groups facing real-life discrimination can achieve empowerment and well-being by challenging stigmatisation (Branscombe et al., 1999), this is not so straightforward in the detention context. Here, it is difficult to contest one's lack of citizenship, so challenging the stigmatised detainee status is not easy. Despite this, several detainees described the benefits of identifying with this group. Future research should therefore explore the conditions that might lead to collective action within the detention context.

The present research also extends the Social Curse perspective (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012; Stevenson et al., 2014) by suggesting that in addition to groups turning against the individual,

individuals themselves might choose to distance themselves from the group to avoid burdening important others with their distress. Distress can also lead to group members avoiding interactions, thus preventing bond formation, or promoting the dissolution of existing bonds.

Furthermore, the present research shows that these Social Cure and Social Curse processes of identification, meaning-making, and coping were flexible and continuously negotiated. Their effectiveness varied in accordance with the social identifications detainees brought to their detention experiences, their levels of trust and uncertainty, their views of other detainees, the passing of time, and the distress and deportation experiences they witnessed daily. In such situations, the decision to turn to others is not made lightly. In the long-term, relying on others can become problematic, confusing, or can expose detainees to painful realities; experiences which some longer-term detainees decide to avoid.

Finally, this study suggests that the benefits of social identification for well-being are present even in such extreme contexts of heightened distress and uncertainty about the future, lack of trust, confinement, and relative social isolation. In addition to harnessing the benefits of social identification, several policy and practice implications have been outlined in Box 1 for the IRCs and Home Office. Ultimately, existing social identities enable re-establishing some form of agency and group-based support whilst in part also contributing to the distress.

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Box 1: Recruitment strategy

Three recruitment strategies were undertaken.

1. Participants were invited by the main author following completion of a survey about their quality of life (Bosworth & Kellezi, 2013). Only those who engaged openly with the researcher (thus indicating no concerns about participation) were invited to interview; and nearly 90% consented.
2. Those who had consented were asked to identify other potential participants. Both methods overcome some of the issues of trust that are common in research with this population (Bosworth & Kellezi 2017a).
3. Some detainees were recommended to participate by IRC staff. Fewer than 50% agreed to meet with the researcher following this strategy, indicating that potential participants who had any concerns about the study felt free to refuse.

Table 1:

Summary of participant characteristics

Participant characteristics	Summary
Age*	Range 20-59
Gender	Men 38% (n=15) Women 62% (n=25)
Origin*	Africa Asia Central America North America South America Europe
Interview length	Range [10-80 minutes] Mean =37 minutes
Immigration status/Reasons for participant detention*	Asylum seeker (n=10) Visa overstay (n=12) Prison sentence (n=12) Illegal entry (n=1) Problem with passport (n=1) No information (n=4)
Time in detention	2 weeks -2 years
Time in the UK	1 day -36 Years

Interviews** conducted Alone 88% (n=35)

In presence of another detainee upon their request 12% (n=4)

**Information not requested in the interview but nevertheless volunteered by the participants*

***There were no differences in the quality of these interviews. This was at times based on shared physical space e.g. women's roommates.*

Table 2.

Individual participant characteristics

Nationality	Gender	Length of stay in detention	Immigration status	Age (estimate when not reporter)	Pseudonym
Morton hall (men)					
Asia	Male	2 months	Asylum seeker	Mid 30s	Abdul
Europe	Male	2.5 months	Prison sentence	Late 20s	Andrew
Asia	Male	2 months	Visa overstay	Mid 40s	Irfan
Asia	Male	2 weeks	Visa overstay	Mid 20s	Seij
Central America	Male	5 months	Visa overstay	Mid 20s	David
Asia	Male	1 month	Visa overstay	Mid 50s	Aki
Middle east	Male	1.5 months	Asylum seeker	Mid 20s	Aroon
Not disclosed	Mae	2 years	Prison sentence	Early 30s	Ajani
Central America	Male	1 Year	Prison sentence	Mid 40s	Bao
Central America	Male	2 months	Prison sentence	Mid 30s	Carlos
Asia	Male	5 months	Prison sentence	Mid 30s	Simon
Africa	Male	7	Prison sentence	Mid 20s	Roman
Western Africa	Male	3 months	Asylum seekers	Mid 30s	Adisa
South America	Male	15 months	Prison sentence	Mid 50s	Eduardo
Middle East	Male	1 month	Asylum seeker	Early 40s	Dara
Yarl's Wood (women)					
African		11 months	Asylum seeker	Mid 40s	Elena
African decent	Female	3 weeks (detained twice before)	No information	48	Tila
Asia	Female	2 months	Visa overstay	32	Alecia
Africa	Female	9 months	Asylum seeker	Mid 40s	Tara
West Africa	Female	5 months	Visa overstay	Mid 30s	Esmir
East Africa	Female	1.5 months	Visa overstay	Mid 30	Enam
Southern Africa	Female	1 month	Visa overstay	32	Eva
Central Africa	Female	8 months	Prison sentence	20	Lea

Asia	Female	1 month	Asylum seekers	Late 20s	Edith
Europe	Female	2 weeks	No information	Mid 40s	Mara
Central America	Female	1.5 months	Asylum seeker	Mid 30s	Baez
America	Female	0.5 months	Issues with passport	Early 50s	Alma
Africa	Female	8 months	Prison sentence	Mid 30s	Maria
Africa	Female	6 months	No information	40	Ode
Africa	Female	2 months	Visa overstay	Mid 20s	Haji
Africa	Female	0.5 months	No information	Mid 30s	Sabra
Western Africa	Female	1.5 months	Asylum seeker	Mid 30s	Zane
Asia	Female	1 month	Asylum seeker	Late 20s	Ali
Africa	Female	1 month	Visa overstay	Mid 20s	Kalifa
Africa	Female	20 months	No information	Early 40s	Celeste
Southern African	Female	1.5 months	Prison sentence	43	Anna
Western African	Female	2 months	Visa overstay	Mid 40s	Efa
Unknown	Female	25 months	Prison sentence	Mid 40s	Uma
South America	Female	2 months	Visa overstay	Mid 40s	Aimar
Europe	Female	0.5 months	Illegal entry	23	Tina

Table 3:

Example interview questions

Life before detention	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>e.g. What was your life like before coming to detention?</i>
Engagement with and experiences of health services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>e.g. What mental health services are offered in this centre? How do you find out about these services?</i>
Sources of support including institutional and other support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Where do you go for support when things get difficult?</i>
Cultural understanding of mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>e.g. Can detainees talk about mental health issues? What do you do when you hear another detainees is struggling with mental health issues?</i>
Ways of coping with detention	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>e.g. What do you do when things get difficult? Is there anything provided in the centre that is particularly useful?</i>
Nature of relationships with other detainees and staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>e.g. What are the relationships between the detainees in here?</i>

Table 4:*Summary of main themes*

Theme	Subthemes	Illustration quote
1. Key identity challenges affecting detainees	Loss of social networks	<i>'I feel lonely all the time. My family is not here.'</i> (Albert)
	Loss of rights	<i>'it's like tennis... you're just swinging, you don't know which side you're landing in'</i> (Ajani)
	Loss of agency and control	<i>'They will drag you, it doesn't matter what you are wearing'</i> (Esmir)
2. Existing identities as a means of making sense and coping with detention	Existing social identities as source of support, distraction, and dealing with distress	<i>'I always have someone on the other end of the phone'</i> (Eva)
	Existing social identities as sources of burden or rejection	<i>'How can I put them to suffer like me?'</i> (Eduardo)
	Maintaining social identities through new relationships*	<i>'If I know you are a Christian, I feel more confident relating with you'</i> (Celeste)
3. Emergent identities as a means of making sense of and coping with detention	Detainee identity as source of support and understanding	<i>'we feel like we are a family here'</i> (Enam)
	Detainee identity as source of distress and reminders of fate	<i>"[I] can't take their problems, because I have so much myself".</i> (Aurelia)
	The purposeful use of detainee social identity	<i>'I'm not looking here for friends'</i> (Carlos)

*Online supplement 1

Box 2: Policy and practice recommendation

Rebuilding sense of agency and control

Being detained is experienced as a profound loss of rights and agency, and is the source of much psychological distress. It is important for IRCs to address these issues by providing detainees with clear and frequently-imparted information about the Centre's regulations and Home Office decision making. Detainees should also be given opportunities to be involved in decision making within the Centre, such as the ability to design regimes. This can enhance one's sense of agency, thereby creating more positive experiences.

Promoting shared identities

Social identities play a key role in allowing detainees to cope with the diverse and complex challenges they face. When designing IRC policies and practices, it is therefore vital to appreciate how important social identities are for detainees' well-being. For instance, IRCs need to provide detainees with opportunities to maintain their contact with existing social networks (e.g., friends/family). The creation and maintenance of strong and supportive connections within detention should also be promoted. Activities that offer opportunities for meaningful group memberships (especially for those who isolate themselves or are longer-term residents) may prove particularly beneficial in light of the study's findings. One barrier to the creation of detainee connections relates to lack of trust, unpredictability of relationships, and concerns with one case. Again, fostering a sense of agency and promoting meaningful social contact would help to reduce these problems, thereby promoting stronger connections and enhancing the social support detainees derive from them.

Provision of professional psychological support

Finally, dealing with distress is essential, because it affects both the distressed individual and the whole group of detainees. Psychological support through independent and impartial professionals that is provided in a sensitive and culturally appropriate way would be beneficial, especially for those who lack any form of social support, or those experiencing crisis.

Supporting undocumented migrants outside detention

The findings of this study can also be extended to undocumented migrant populations outside of detention. Such individuals are likely to experience many of the challenges faced by detainees, including membership of devalued groups and dealing with the loss of previous social networks. Fostering a sense of solidarity and well-being through development of meaningful identities may also be beneficial for this wider migrant population, and further highlights the important role played by the social world in enhancing psychological health of people enduring some of society's harshest realities.

Online Supplement 1:

Maintaining social identities through new relationships

Whilst confinement created physical separation from important groups and identities outside detention, in some cases detainees could enact valued social identities (e.g., nationality, faith), and derive benefits from them inside detention through interactions with other detainees. Such connections help detainees decide who to trust: since there is a common fear that association with detainees deemed by the authorities to be ‘*trouble-makers*’ or ‘*bad apples*’ could impact negatively on one’s immigration case, being able to relate to others based on a pre-existing identity provides a sense of commonality, as well as clearer expectations and understandings of norms and shared behaviour.

Extract 16

I talk to a few people. [...] they put some people in isolation, they say on drug and that so if you try to associate with the wrong people they gonna gets you and you’re gonna get in more trouble, so it’s not everybody I talk to. If I know you are a Christian, I feel more confident relating with you (Celeste)

Celeste’s account highlights the potential risk detainees perceive in associating with the ‘*wrong people*’, which underpins most of the social interaction inside detention. Given the potential consequences, finding a reason (or confidence) to trust fellow detainees enough to associate with them is essential. The discovery of shared or compatible social identifications, like religion, allowed this to happen (Sosis, 2005). Religious identity not only enabled trust, but also provided emotional support and strength, and meaning-making in a distressing situation, as Aisha explains:

Extract 17

Urm well the people around here, most of them are positive and we worship together, we go to church together, we feel shit together, that is one positive thing that makes us so strong the faith that we have here... Yes the hope, the encouragement that you get from others when you are a bit down. Yeah people encourage you say it's alright, it is well, no matter what happens God is with you, he wills the best for you and all that, it's really encouraging it makes you strong. (Aisha)

Many of the participants described religious identity as a key source of belonging and connection, where those sharing the same religion trusted, encouraged, and understood each other. The shared experience of religion took place in the form of worship in the religious areas, informal meetings, and even group singing, a rare source of meaningful activity in detention. Using Aisha's words, going to church and worshipping together was one way to make faith stronger. Frankl (2004) also highlights the value of religion in dealing with circumstances in which people experience injustices, fear, and anger, through allowing prisoners to escape the misery of their surroundings and finding a meaning for the suffering that goes beyond the self. Other strong shared identities were based on nationality, parenthood, and language, the latter being essential for non-English speakers. This is consistent with Social Cure research showing existing identities to be an essential source of emotional and practical support, trust, collaboration and a sense of belonging (Jetten *et al.*, 2017), and collective resilience (Drury *et al.*, 2015). However, participants also explain how they used existing identities to form connections in the new environment, and how valued social identities enabled sense-making and coping with distrust, distress, and confinement.

Unlike most of the Social Cure research, these latter accounts talk about existing identities transcending existing social networks and being enacted in a new environment with new members, thus operating at a more superordinate level (at least initially), while still maintaining their benefits and power.

ⁱ There are exceptions, including those serving indefinite sentences for public protection (Annison, 2015), or life sentences.

ⁱⁱ Researcher reflections on methodology and ethics are discussed rigorously and extensively in specific publications by two of the authors (Bosworth & Kellezi, 2017a; 2017b).

ⁱⁱⁱ Ethical permission was obtained from Nottingham Trent University Ethics Committee.

^{iv} Some scholars argue that prison legitimacy should also be challenged as state policies fail to address inequalities that account for large proportion of prison populations (e.g. Van Der Kolk, 2014).