Summary “Small steps of great importance: a new perspective on humane reception of asylum seekers”

The asylum policies in the Netherlands are designed and formulated as 'strict but fair' and the reception as 'austere yet humane'. In recent years, the entry and reception policy for refugees has focused on increased manageability and efficiency. This emphasis has put the humane approach under pressure.

This qualitative study describes the daily experiences of thirty residents and ex-residents of asylum seeker centers. It shows their conscious and unconscious strategies to keep a positive attitude to life. The goal of the research is to show new perspectives on the current situation of the reception so that the centers can become living environments in which people are able to maintain their resilience. The main research question is: “What are the necessary conditions that keep up or recover resilience among asylum seekers in asylum seekers centers?” Resilience is the human capacity to deal with change and distress yet keep functioning and developing. This is of great importance in order to build a new future, whether in the Netherlands, or elsewhere.

The focus on negative and hopeless aspects of living in a reception centre seems to be dominant in talking and writing about asylum seekers. In order to show new perspectives in which resilience is featured, another approach is needed. In this study the waiting period in an asylum seekers’ centre is therefore seen as a liminal phase. Liminality is a state in which persons are out of their structural context yet not part of a new context. This can lead to negative feelings such as insecurity and the idea of losing position. At the same time the in-between position can lead to positive feelings like renewed inspiration, creativity, and reflection. Taking these multiple sides of the waiting experience in a centre into consideration makes opportunities for resilience visible in this study.

Results

Fleeing does not only mean leaving loved ones and home countries behind, but also a chance for a new start. The stories of respondents tell of the motivation and energy that can arise from the opportunity to re-start their lives in the Netherlands. People want to be of significance during this waiting period.
Nevertheless, this motivated and resilient attitude has to come into existence within the austere environment of a reception centre. Within reception centers there are opportunities to do unpaid work and to learn basic Dutch. There are also a handful of opportunities to do paid work or start a study. However, this research shows that these possibilities are unclear to respondents and therefore only occasionally utilized.

Furthermore, the wish to get in contact with Dutch people was a striking theme in interviews with residents. Because of a language barrier, experienced image formation of asylum seekers, and a lack of social occasions where people can meet each other, it seems hard to bring the wish for contact into practice.

A few exceptions among respondents did find meaningful activities during their waiting period and were able to deepen their knowledge, get recognition for their capacities, and create a network through which new perspectives could arise.

Conditions that keep up resilience

For an actual humane approach within reception, space should be created for those circumstances that improve resilience among residents.

1) Take another approach to residents. See people in their full potential and not only as ‘part of their asylum procedure’ with the negative connotation of their non-status. Instead, people should be addressed as a mother, a father, a carpenter, or engineer. They should be called upon for their talents which can be of significance in their living environment. An example could be restructuring the maintenance and reparations of buildings in reception centers, which is now centrally organized and could instead be arranged locally with the help of residents.

2) Support the emergence of social connections. Contact with families fulfills the need for information in an insecure period. Social contacts in and around the center create support, distraction, and can open doors to new possibilities. One small step could be the improvement of internet availability and accessibility in centers and another could be facilitating social gatherings (like parties) in which people in and around the center can meet each other.

3) An emphasis on the importance of meaningful activities. Residents do want to make themselves useful and own their daily life again. This is necessary to keep up self esteem and trust. If every center would provide insight into these possibilities and make them tangible, it would already be a small step in the right direction.
Providing these conditions within reception centers could lead to recovering strength and connections with the living environment. This could enable a reception that on a long term is profitable for both asylum seekers and the host society as a whole.