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Trapped in Time and Place

Cognitive Immobility among Diaspora Communities

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Abstract

This article adopts the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach to explore the phenomenon of cognitive immobility, where individuals remain cognitively trapped in experiences or locations despite elapsed time and physical distance from those events and places. It explores how (im)mobility and life transitions hold people in the past. The study focuses on the cognitive experiences of Mrs Eve, an African-American woman who on her first visit to Dakar, Senegal, felt a deep, unexplained connection to the place. The article triangulates Mrs Eve's experiences against those shared by other individuals in previously published peer-reviewed narratives to reveal how (im)mobility and life transitions can lead to cognitive immobility. It underscores that traumatic or memorable life experiences can result in cognitive immobility under certain circumstances and thus enriches the discourse on people who are cognitively trapped in their past.

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1 Introduction

This article employs the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology to examine a case study and compare it to secondary narratives to explore how (im)mobility and life transitions influence people to become trapped in the past. IPA is adopted because it privileges the subjective accounts of the individual, where the 'lifeworld of the individual' is the central concern (Eatough and Smith, 2006). Using this approach, the objective of this article is to deepen our understanding of cognitive immobility. It does not seek to generalise the findings but instead aims to provide an empirically grounded interpretation of a phenomenon that has, until now, been merely theoretical (Molenkamp, Weerdesteijn and Smeulers, 2024: 3).

The study focused on the cognitive experiences of one person, Mrs Eve, as understood from her narratives and the meanings she derived from those experiences. She is an African-American woman who developed a deep, unexplained connection to Dakar, Senegal, during her first visit there. Her experiences are triangulated against previously published peer-reviewed narratives of individuals who shared similar experiences of being trapped in their past.

The notion of being cognitively trapped in the past was only recently conceptualised. A research article published by *Culture & Psychology* in 2022 introduced the term 'cognitive immobility' into the academic literature. It describes the experiences of individuals who, despite having left several previous residences, find themselves longing for these places, constantly retrieving past episodes from memory, resulting in mental stimulations of the past, physical travel and consequent metaphorical homelessness and stress (Olumba, 2023). Olumba describes cognitive immobility 'as a stressful feeling of mental entrapment that causes a conscious or unconscious effort to relive past episodes in places one lived or visited in the past to reclaim what one may be missing or left behind' (Olumba, 2023: 772). The inability to remain in a location or life experience for reasons beyond one's control may lead to the body physically moving without a concurrent mental migration or departure, resulting in the mind remaining trapped in the previous location or experience (Olumba, 2023).

Several published works have showcased the experiences of people who can be said to have been cognitively trapped in the past or experienced cognitive

immobility (Erdal and Ezzati, 2015; Kaya and Keklik, 2021; Orlova, 2022; Phan, 2022; Philipps, 2023; Soaga, 2022; Soria, 2022). However, since cognitive immobility is a relatively new concept, these studies did not categorically focus on it; instead, they highlighted the experiences of individuals that mirror those of someone experiencing cognitive immobility For instance, the experiences of a Vietnamese PhD student at an Australian university, who was stranded in Vietnam by Covid-19 travel restrictions, depict the stress and frustration of belonging to multiple places and spaces simultaneously (Phan, 2022: 7). A similar narrative by Megan Soria, a Filipino PhD student in Australia, describes 'weird sentiments' of being disoriented and stuck at home, which she hesitated to share (Soria, 2022). Similarly, some Polish construction workers find that home is neither here nor there as a result of their personal and professional circumstances, which necessitate frequent moves (Erdal and Ezzati, 2015: 1207).

This article responds to calls for additional research at the intersection of cognition and migration (Kyle and Koikkalainen, 2011; Vari-Lavoisier, 2019; Vari-Lavoisier and Fiske, 2021). Its contribution to this emerging strand of research enriches the discourse on how individuals are cognitively entrapped in past moments, places and events (Olumba, 2023; Swaim, 2022; Uba and Olumba, 2023).

Following this introduction is a conceptualisation of the term 'cognitive immobility' as a lens through which to understand people's lived experiences, and a review of existing studies on cognitive immobility and other studies similar to this phenomenon. In the next section, we outline the methods, describe the IPA approach and its relevance to this study, and detail the data collection and analysis approach. Subsequently, we present the narratives and experiences of Mrs Eve and the meanings she attaches to them, as well as how her experiences illustrate cognitive immobility. Then, we give excerpts from secondary data narratives, analyse them in the context of cognitive immobility, and compare them with Mrs Eve's experiences. Next, we identify and describe the cognitive features that tie these experiences together and discuss why they should be understood as cognitive immobility. A discussion and conclusion follow.

2 Cognitive Immobility as a Framework to View People's Lived Experiences

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed millions of people to the state of immobility. Immobility is the '… continuity in one's center of gravity, or place of residence, relative to spatial and temporal frames' (Schewel, 2020: 329). Mobility, on the

other hand, involves physical movement as well as '… the act of moving entangled with power, norms and meaning, and involving social, material, temporal and symbolic components that make movement (im)possible' (Cangià and Zittoun, 2020: 641). The term '(im)mobility' is used to represent both mobility and immobility (Gruber, 2021: 277). According to Christou (2011: 252), personal accounts that involve migration are emotional accounts of intricate entanglements of emotions, experiences and imaginations, which are all connected to memory.

Memory could be a field of study or the neurocognitive ability to store and recall information (Tulving, 2000). There are two types of conscious memories: semantic memories and episodic memories (Corballis, 2019: 1). Whereas episodic memory involves reconstructions of past episodes and other societal incidents (Michaelian, Perrin and Sant' Anna, 2020; Suddendorf and Corballis, 2007), semantic memory relates to the basic information we have about everyday things or places (Corballis, 2019; Michaelian et al, 2020). Whether remembering the past or imagining the future, previous experiences and imaginations are vital (Bjerre, 2020: 68) and require the ability to reconstruct them (De Nardi et al, 2020: 5; Schacter, Addis and Backner, 2008: 42). We rely on this memory when we re-experience events, people and episodes that lead to cognitive immobility, and therein lies our entrapment. This study considers memory to be a future-oriented, inventive and constructive process (Gamsakhurdia, 2019: 169; Valsiner, 2014).

The significance of conscious memory (semantic and episodic) (Corballis, 2019) in the context of being stuck in the past, or cognitive immobility, is underscored by its role in recollecting the past and envisioning future scenarios (De Nardi et al, 2020: 5; Schacter et al, 2008: 42). Individuals who experience cognitive immobility rely heavily on episodic memory (Olumba, 2023: 777). According to Olumba (2023: 780, italics in original):

> Broadly, *cognitive immobility* can be defined as a stressful sense of mental entrapment in a particular location or several locations, which may result in mind-wandering activities in which a person's mind travels to previously lived or visited areas, drawing on episodic memory to recreate mental simulations of scenes, smells, sounds and sights from those previous encounters with or without cognitive control over the mind.

In other words, cognitive immobility is the stressful sense of being confined mentally to past places, events, cultures and objects while being physically elsewhere. In this sense, cognitive immobility is connected to migratory experiences. In his article in *Transforming Society*, Olumba extended the concept

of cognitive immobility beyond transnational perspectives to include several aspects of life, such as broken relationships, dementia, abandonment by friends or family, bereavement, abuse, trauma, losing a home and integrating into a new culture, among others (Olumba, 2022b). As such, cognitive immobility goes beyond being cognitively stuck in a location to encompass various life transitions.

A term related to cognitive immobility is homesickness, which has been described as the '… longing or desire for return to a rooted place, relying on the recurring memory of lived experience' (Bryan, 2005: 44). According to Olumba (2023), homesickness is part of cognitive immobility. 'Unlike homesickness and Persephone syndrome, cognitive immobility is a stressful experience of cognitive entrapment at a single or multiple locations; those suffering from it may yearn for places they have visited or lived in, which may be different from where they call home' (Olumba, 2023: 781–782). Thus, homesickness is the longing for home, whereas cognitive immobility is the mental entrapment in the past, which could be a home, other locations or life experiences.

However, the subsequent return may not alleviate this stress and ultimately leads to a feeling of being metaphorically homeless (Olumba, 2023). This idea mirrors the stories of the people analysed in this article.

Drawing from Olumba (2023), using cognitive immobility as a conceptual framework for understanding people's lived experiences involves examining how certain factors influence individuals' emotions and actions. The first aspect is understanding how an emotional vacuum created from physically moving away from a space or experience, combined with the stress of remembering it, keeps individuals cognitively trapped in the past, affecting their present. The second aspect is determining how life restrictions or circumstances hinder individuals from 'going back' to recover what they left behind. Adopting this approach is crucial for understanding how people's lived experiences can mentally entrap them, causing them to remain stuck in past moments and places.

According to (Olumba, 2023: 780, italics in original):

> cognitive immobility occurs when an individual is unable to stay put in the intended place due to the *absence* or *presence* of certain *restrictions* or *circumstances* beyond their control, which may originate in their present or desired location, inside themselves or in the external world.

The narratives presented in this article echo this situation, each including a type of mobility influenced by forces beyond the control of the individuals whose experiences are recounted here.

These restrictions and circumstances may require their physical migration or departure, not their *mental migration* or *departure*. As a result, their mobility results in mental immobility, and such people can be described as being *cognitively immobilised*. (Olumba, 2023: 780, italics in original)

3 An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Approach

This study uses empirical data supported by the IPA approach (Eatough and Smith, 2017; Tuffour, 2017) to substantiate the foundational assumptions of the cognitive immobility framework. The collected data—comprising the '*personal* experiences and meaning-making' (Braun and Clarke, 2021: 41, italics in original) of Mrs Eve—was triangulated with data from secondary sources. 'Phenomenological research such as IPA means taking a first-person perspective seriously because it recognises that our experiences have a quality of for-me-ness' (Eatough and Shaw, 2019: 50). In other words, IPA involves interpreting participants' perceptions and experiences to better understand the studied phenomenon (Smith, 2004; Tuffour, 2017: 3). Many IPA studies are limited by small sample sizes (Fox and Diab, 2015; Moody, 2022), as was the case with this study. Stratford and Bradshaw (2021: 99) suggest that data from a small group of knowledgeable respondents can yield significant insights, even so. Thus, IPA was selected for this study because it is suitable for studies with small sample sizes, thereby allowing a deep exploration of Mrs Eve's cognitive experiences and the meanings she attached to them to better understand cognitive immobility. Additionally, using the IPA approach enabled a triangulation with narratives from previously published articles to enrich the findings. This study involved a purposively recruited respondent who provided informed consent.

Following the op-ed related to the published peer-reviewed article on cognitive immobility, several individuals shared their experiences with the first author, which were similar to those detailed in the article. Among them was Mrs Eve. Motivated by the op-ed on cognitive immobility published by *The Conversation* (Olumba, 2022a),[1] Mrs Eve shared her experiences related to the phenomenon through online chats and emails in response to questions from the first author. Their interactions facilitated the sharing of her story.

1 According to statistics from the publishers, over 511,000 people have read this op-ed published by *The Conversation*.

The data was collected in 2022 using email and instant messaging (IM), specifically WhatsApp (including video calls), following the widespread acceptance of the use of online technologies during the Covid-19 pandemic and the periods following the easing of global lockdowns, and because of the geographical distance of Mrs Eve. These methods offered convenience, security and privacy for the participants. In the case of WhatsApp, chats were downloaded and saved on secured laptops before being deleted from the phones.

For primary data collection, Mrs Eve shared her experiences in Dakar and New York, including the emotional stress she had endured during those periods. The questions focused on her visit to Dakar, her cognitive experiences there, and the aftermath when she returned to New York. She was not pressured to include or exclude specific details in her narratives. The secondary narratives with which Mrs Eve's data was triangulated came from studies chosen because they all involved people who had migrated, like Mrs Eve, for reasons that were beyond their control.

Recent studies underscore the effectiveness of online and social media platforms for qualitative research, emphasising their innovative potential for data collection and its drawbacks (Mavhandu-mudzusi et al, 2022; Neo et al, 2022; Sliedrecht, Stommel and Schep, 2022). They highlight the advantages of broad geographic access to participants and the convenience of engaging with diverse populations, including sensitive groups. However, concerns about privacy and the absence of non-verbal cues when interviewing online have been raised (Mavhandu-mudzusi et al, 2022; Neo et al, 2022; Sliedrecht et al, 2022). However, in a phenomenological study that used WhatsApp for data collection, Mavhandu-mudzusi et al (2022) argued that WhatsApp video calls could mitigate the lack of traditional non-verbal cues.

Braun and Clarke (2021: 41) assert that the initial process of the IPA involves taking notes or recording data, aiming to capture the participants' explicit meanings or experiences of a phenomenon (semantic), or an interpretation of the participants' perspectives from the researcher's standpoint (latent). After that, 'emergent themes' are identified for each participant. Reviewing these 'emergent themes' leads to the formulation of 'super-ordinate' or 'master' themes specific to each participant (Braun and Clarke, 2021). This process is replicated for all participants, creating a comprehensive list of 'super-ordinate themes'. These 'master themes' provide structure for the analysis framework, whereas the 'emergent themes' form the main details (Braun and Clarke, 2021). We constructed the narratives around the 'emergent themes'. To validate the findings, we used secondary data for triangulation.

All the authors of the study have a background of migration and are involved in studies related to migratory experiences, bringing diverse perspectives to

the study. The influence of the authors' backgrounds on the interpretation of the phenomena therefore must be acknowledged. Personal sensitivities can all influence people's experiences and how they are interpreted (Vlavonou, 2023).

4 Results

This section reports on the emergent themes derived from the analysis. It presents Mrs Eve's background and her journey to Dakar, Senegal, followed by her narratives of the emotional turmoil, stress and sense of loss that emerged weeks and months after she first left Dakar. Embedded within Mrs Eve's narratives is an analysis of her experiences relating to the understudied phenomenon—the idea of being cognitively stuck in the past. The following subsection draws from the literature to highlight findings from studies that mirror Mrs Eve's experiences.

4.1 *I Felt 'like a Child Being Torn Away from Their Mother'*

Mrs Eve is an African-American woman who was raised as a Methodist Christian, attended a Catholic school and converted to Islam at the age of 22. Now a mother of three, she resides in Dakar, Senegal. Mrs Eve's story offers narratives and experiences of an American woman living in New York who meets a young Senegalese man, falls in love and decides to travel to his homeland. Upon her first arrival in Dakar, she felt a deep connection to Africa, which she found surprising given her lack of prior thoughts or urges regarding the continent. Sharing her profound connection with Dakar, which she first visited in December 1998, Mrs Eve said:

> My first time to Senegal in 1998, I had a very strong reaction to being there. I literally said that I would be perfectly happy to die there. I felt so connected, and I cried and longed for it weeks after returning back to the US.

She returned to the US after a 10-day visit, and immediately started longing for Dakar. Although she had visited Dakar for only a few days, on arriving in New York she felt she had left something important behind.

[She was not used to staying in a place with] no hot water, everyone ate from the same bowl, and I did not understand what people around me were saying. But through all this by the time it was time to return to the US, I had formed a deep connectedness to Senegal and the people. I felt like I belonged there and that's when I had the thought that this was the place that I could be content to die in.

While in Dakar, she experienced things that were common in that location but were strange to her. The sounds of conversations that she did not understand, the food, the practice of the whole family eating from the same large bowl, and the lack of access to water, among other experiences, were stored in her memory. Migration studies have not addressed sufficiently how those who have visited or moved to a new place use episodic memories to reconstruct past sights, scenes, sounds and smells (Olumba, 2023: 777).

After a while in Dakar, Mrs Eve started to feel an inexplicable sense of home, despite the differences in lifestyle, language and people. She felt a connection, which she assumed was a transgenerational familial bond.

My burning question is … does something in my DNA know this place? I was excited, but didn't know how different things actually were to be nervous, no hot water and no personal space. But I was welcomed, and I felt a sense of being home even though things were so different. I also find that I have a very emotional reaction to various geolocations. Some places make me feel extremely anxious and uncomfortable, and some are familiar and welcoming, like home and I don't know why. I am trying to understand whether cognitive immobility is transgenerational.

According to Christou (2011: 253), people's nostalgic feelings when arriving at a new place could be transferred 'not only to the second, but even to the third generation'. Since cognitive immobility goes beyond nostalgic feelings, further research could help unravel this question of transgenerational transfers of cognitive immobility. Mrs Eve holds a master's degree in clinical psychology. Therefore, she was not in unfamiliar territory, but the feelings she had were unfamiliar. This raises the question of whether cognitive immobility could be transgenerational, a topic that warrants further research along with its connections to trauma, migration, loss, divorce and similar life-changing experiences.

Mrs Eve's ancestry, rooted in Africa generations ago, made her wonder whether cognitive immobility is connected to transgenerational experiences. The vivid re-experiencing of emotions, people, music, sounds, smells and food became so overwhelming that her 'rememberings' became stressful. Although it was a brief visit, she felt that she had left Dakar only physically, remaining cognitively trapped in the city, possibly forever.

When asked about her feelings upon returning to New York, she said:

> I felt a sense of loss, like a child being torn away from their mother. Yes, I felt really down for a few weeks after leaving, almost like a mild depression.

At that time, she was mourning her perceived entrapment and yearned to reclaim what she believed she had left behind in that location, Dakar. This sentiment, to a lesser degree, resonates with that of a chemist, Chisom Chuba, who emigrated from Nigeria to Ireland in 2020. She remarked that ending video calls with her family in Nigeria felt like a plaster being ripped from her skin (Soaga, 2022).

Mrs Eve responded affirmatively when asked whether she recalled her experiences in Dakar:

> Yes, I relived my experiences there over and over in my head. It was during the month of Ramadan. My father-in-law insisted that we get married the first day we were there, the food was great and family everywhere. My husband had 30 siblings! We would walk to the mosque in the dark of every morning for the prayer. We were technically married already at the courthouse in New York right before the vacation, but my in-laws were not aware.

The statement encapsulates elements deeply significant to her, reflecting the depth of her immersion in memories of Dakar. She recounted not only the people she met, but also the practices, spaces and scenarios that formed the backdrop of her experiences. 'Continually remembering past episodes, favourable or unpleasant, can lead to cognitive immobility' (Olumba, 2023: 781).

When she left Dakar to return to New York, Mrs Eve experienced what felt like a *mourning process*. Cognitive immobility can be likened to a mourning process (Olumba, 2023: 781). The mourning process can manifest:

> … as a persistent, low-toned sadness, a potential for intense episodic sadness activated under the many circumstances that bring into sharp focus the memory of the lost person [life experience]; the occasional intense pain as memories related to the lost person emerge in present interchanges with others ….
>
> KERNBERG, 2010: 612

This mourning process, or the sense of sadness and intense pain that emerges when circumstances evoke memories of lost life experiences, resonates with the feelings described by Mrs Eve and Chisom in Ireland. As a result of Mrs Eve's mourning for Dakar she sought to return and reclaim what she might have left behind there. Mourning is associated with guilt, loss, remorse, reparation, and severe depression and involves a degree of internal withdrawal when circumstances evoke past experiences with the lost person or life events (Kernberg,

2010). These expressions and narratives resonate with Olumba's (2023) analysis, which provides a striking example of cognitive immobility.

Despite travelling back and forth between New York (where she resided) and Dakar, Mrs Eve could not regain what she felt she had left in Dakar. In many cases, cognitive immobility can result in a sense of metaphorical homelessness, where 'no *home* is truly a *home*; even the previous *home*—the ancestral *home*—has lost its distinguishing features and allure' (Olumba, 2023: 782). For such individuals, no place feels like home again. In Mrs Eve's case, cognitive immobility led her to find a *sense of belonging* in a community she now calls home. Three years after her first visit to Dakar, she left the US and moved to Africa with her husband. She now lives in Dakar, Senegal.

5 Diverse Experiences of Being Entrapped in the Past

As previously stated, we included some narratives from published works in the analysis. These came from peer-reviewed papers, a university student's blog post and reports involving a supermodel. The excerpts were chosen because they resonate with Mrs Eve's experiences and involve migration from one place to another.

The first is the story of Megan from the Philippines, a PhD student in Australia, who described herself as experiencing cognitive immobility. Months after moving to Australia for her studies, she felt disoriented and in a state of disbelief, often muttering to herself (Soria, 2022). Feeling out of place, she unconsciously relived her life at home, which became a source of stress and an internal struggle to adapt to life in Australia. According to Soria (2022):

> I have never told anyone about these sentiments before because it was so weird that I thought people might think I have gone mad. But just last month (a little over three years since I have moved), I read an article from *The Conversation* about a psychological process called Cognitive Immobility. I got goosebumps, and I was so relieved. What I felt had a name, and other people had the same experience. I wish I had known this existed before. Dealing with it would have been easier. So, I am breaking down this mental phenomenon for my fellow international students and migrants who are experiencing it, as a warm hug and to say that yes, it is a real and a shared experience.

After reading an article in *The Conversation* (Olumba, 2022a), Megan had become aware of her cognitive immobility, the stressful feeling of being cogni-

tively stuck in the Philippines while in Australia. She avoided sharing her 'sentiments' with others to avoid being labelled as 'mad'; the stressful feelings of being stuck in the past were troublesome. The article aided her healing and recovery, motivating her to share her experiences online to support others.

A similar condition is evident in an empirical study conducted among Syrian students who fled to Türkiye, and who seemed to be affected by an unexplainable issue. According to Kaya and Keklik (2021: 5), the students stated that:

> I am still in Syria. My soul is there. I always have memories of my dead cousins. This affects my getting used to here. Those days will never come back.
>
> F7

> I left my homeland, my nation, my relatives, everything in Syria. I was physically here but spiritually there. This affected my getting used to here.
>
> KAYA and KEKLIK, 2021: 5

These excerpts express the emotions of the students as they recognised their new reality. Kaya and Keklik (2021: 7755) concluded by quoting, 'They left some things in Syria'. Leaving 'something' in Syria might demand moving back to Syria if conditions allowed. Since they could not do this they might re-experience it cognitively. The excerpts depict a sense of emotional pain and loss exacerbated by a traumatic past that they acknowledge they still 'spiritually' inhabit—which is cognitive immobility. Christou (2011: 254) noted that separation from one's homeland and relatives can trigger intense feelings of sorrow, melancholy and depression, especially during personal, social and family crises.

These perspectives depict a sense of loss and pain associated with memories of the past related to trauma. In the case of the Syrian students, their entrapment in the past is associated with their traumatic experiences of war and displacement.

When people arrive in unfamiliar places, they frequently feel excitement, confusion and anxiety (Cangià, 2017: 24). This pattern is common among those who, after an initial urge to move abroad, become disillusioned and yearn to return home, which sometimes brings on mental health challenges. This was the experience of Mr Rodion from Anosovo, as exemplified in a peer-reviewed empirical study in Eastern Siberia. According to Orlova (2022: 12):

> Rodion Romanov (63 years old) returned to Anosovo in the 2000s, after years of living in the cities. The packed or encapsulated "mobility" in the

> "immobility outcome" of finding himself in Anosovo, in Rodion's case, involved moving away and back. Rodion left the village as a high-school graduate, but something tugged him back to Anosovo; it is inexplicable, he said. When he was returning, he knew that enterprises were crumbling in Anosovo, but it did not stop him.

While away, Rodion obviously must have been re-experiencing life in Anosovo, which became unbearable at some point, but a few months later, he might long to return to the city. Despite being aware of the deteriorating economic conditions of Anosovo he returned because the inexplicable 'something' in his village was strong enough to draw him back.

This notion of an 'inexplicable condition' is underscored by and resonates with a *New York Times* report (Philipps, 2023) of a condition that affects war veterans—'Strange New Wounds'[2] that affect their minds. The pull of the inexplicable 'something' that draws people towards past environments or experiences illustrates the condition of being stuck in the past, or cognitive immobility.

The last among the narratives is that of Adut Akech, a South Sudan-Australian model. As a child, Adut had faced displacement, poverty and a life in limbo. She lived in a refugee camp during the conflict between South and North Sudan, and spent her childhood in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya before her family relocated to Adelaide, Australia (Saad, 2019). Despite her fame and success, Adut consistently identified herself as a refugee (Marley, 2020). She expressed that she would 'always be a refugee' (O'Connor, 2018), affirming that 'even if I become the richest model in the world, I am still a refugee' (Saad, 2019).

The fact that Adut left the refugee camp in Kenya and a life of poverty to become a supermodel does not imply that she had fully detached herself cognitively from those experiences and locations. Viewing her perspective through the lens of cognitive immobility and analysing it phenomenologically—focusing on her experiences before arriving in Australia—suggests that she might still be reconstructing and re-experiencing those moments. Although she

2 Philipps (2023) reports in the *New York Times* that 'strange new wounds' have led many US veterans to experience PTSD, anxiety, hallucinations, depression, headaches, confusion, nightmares, panic attacks and, in some cases, attempt suicide. For instance, a 22-year-old Marine '… pounded on his neighbor's door in tears, stammering: "There's something in my room! I'm hearing something in my room!"' (Philipps, 2023), yet nothing unusual was found upon searching his room. Philipps (2023) found, through interviews with more than 40 gun-crew veterans and their families across 16 states, that the military was struggling to identify the issues that affected some troops after their return from Syria and Iraq.

frames the sentiment of 'always being a refugee' as acknowledging her past and being proud of her roots, there could be deeper latent meanings to her statements.

Adut's case, like that of the students from Syria, exemplifies someone aware of her entrapment in a past location or life experience, although she may not have a precise term for it. Despite a unique outcome, Adut's perspective could mirror that of many who have faced displacement and the uprooting of their lives, either in positive circumstances or traumatically. At some point, Adut admitted experiencing deep depression, stating, 'I felt depressed to the point of wanting to end it' (Douglas, 2020). It takes great courage for a successful supermodel to admit to such suicidal thoughts, despite being young and in high demand by big brands like Chanel and Gucci. Her accounts, coupled with episodes of intense depression, illustrate the pervasiveness and severity of this stressful feeling of being entrapped in the past, highlighting its potentially life-threatening nature.

6 Unpacking the Key Features of Cognitive Immobility

To better comprehend the conditions associated with cognitive immobility entails going over the three stages of the phenomenon: 1) awareness and separation; 2) retrieval; 3) stabilisation.

The stage of awareness/separation occurs when individuals become aware of their cognitive entrapment in places or experiences they have left or moved away from and their associated stress and longing. At this stage, individuals become *aware* of their circumstances and attempt to mitigate them or may become so overwhelmed by feelings of *separation* that they endeavour to 'retrieve' what they perceive as lost or left behind (Olumba, 2022b).

In the second stage, retrieval, people feel intense loss or separation and become stressed, leading them to try to resolve their cognitive entrapment through physical mobility or by cognitively re-experiencing memories (Olumba, 2022a). This painful stage often ensnares those who leave their ancestral homes, which could lead many to exist in a 'liminal space' where no place feels like home (Olumba, 2023; Perez Murcia, 2019: 1529). In the stabilisation stage, individuals stop yearning for the past and start embracing the present, focusing on the goals that are beneficial to them (Olumba, 2022b; Swaim, 2022).

Of all the key features of cognitive immobility that tie the experiences of Mrs Eve with those in the secondary narratives is the *persistent re-experience and reconstruction of past events or life experiences* in locations that had been left behind. For Mrs Eve, returning to New York from Dakar on the first visit, she

could not help but relive the sights, sounds, smells and scenes from her encounters in Dakar. Recreating pleasant memories can provide solace and provide a coping measure against less favourable current circumstances. Although initially helpful, however, this could later lead to being entrapped in the past (Olumba, 2022b). This may have been the situation for Mrs Eve. Similarly, the narratives of Megan the PhD student, the Syrian students and Adut the supermodel all suggest that they too were persistently re-experiencing past events and life experiences.

When Mrs Eve left Dakar for the first time and returned to New York, she possibly entered the first stage of cognitive immobility—awareness and separation. She became aware of her longing for Dakar and the things associated with it, which led her to cry for weeks and experience depression. Of all the stages, this is when individuals affected by cognitive immobility can feel the most emotional pain, loss and remorse. The phase of returning to Dakar for visits before finally relocating was the retrieval stage, when she sought to reclaim or retrieve what she longed for once she departed from Dakar. Relocating was the stabilisation stage, where she no longer sought to reclaim but to find value in where she now resides. Anyone affected by cognitive immobility should aim to be in this stage, where the focus is on living in the present without a yearning for the past.

The Syrian students were in the awareness/separation stage at the time of the interview, which is why their narratives expressed such a strong sense of emotional loss and pain, compounded by the fact that they could not physically return to their homes. For Mr Rodion, returning to Anosovo despite the declining economic opportunities there was his way of entering the retrieval stage, where after a while, he might want to leave for the city and could make a final return if he entered the stabilisation stage.

Megan from the Philippines was unique in that while she was in the awareness and separation stage she came across an article on cognitive immobility. This piece, written by Olumba (2022a), provided her with the insights that propelled her into the stabilisation stage, thus avoiding the retrieval stage. Being able to identify her condition and name it brought immense relief and initiated her self-healing journey. Her narratives and situation highlight the importance of recognising and naming a physical or psychological condition as the first step in addressing and managing it (Garcia, 2019).

Adut's statement that she will 'always be a refugee' (O'Connor, 2018) embodies the idea that she might be re-experiencing her time in the refugee camp. It is underscored by her assertion that 'even if I become the richest model in the world, I am still a refugee' (Saad, 2019). Such statements are central to understanding her cognitive connection with the past.

Another key cognitive feature that ties these experiences together is *mental immobilisation to the past*. Mrs Eve stated, 'I felt so connected, and I cried and longed for it weeks after returning back to the US'. After leaving Dakar, she was mentally immobilised in that location, which created a sense of longing, loss, stressful emotions and even depression, according to her. This mental immobilisation creates the necessary conditions that plunge individuals into the first stage of cognitive immobility, which is awareness and separation.

For Megan, her mental immobilisation and the consequent emotions were so strange that she could not talk to anyone about them so as to avoid being seen as having gone 'mad'; it was that bad. The Syrian students were also mentally immobilised, having 'left some things in Syria' (Kaya and Keklik, 2022: 7755). It was hard for them to live in the present and integrate into Turkey since they were still 'spiritually there' in Syria. This situation was also the case for Rodion and Adut.

Lastly, a *disrupted sense of identity and home*[3] is a key feature of cognitive immobility. This did not feature prominently in Mrs Eve's case because, from the onset, she saw Dakar as where she would be happy to live and die. However, she experienced the challenge of ambivalence regarding home, where no place is truly 'the home' anymore (Olumba, 2023). The issue of a disrupted sense of identity and home featured prominently in the narratives of Adut, who, despite attaining stardom as a global supermodel, still found her sense of identity deeply connected to her life in a refugee camp. She needed to reclaim her sense of identity to reflect her present realities and ensure that her past did not hinder her present and continuity. The Syrian students experienced not only a disrupted sense of identity but also of home, which hindered their continuity in Türkiye. Because Megan did not elaborate on her 'sentiments', we cannot explain if this disrupted sense of identity and home featured in her experience; the same is true for Rodion.

7 Conclusion

The narratives we analysed in this article have enriched our understanding of cognitive immobility, a phenomenon that could affect those who have migrated, visited various places or experienced life transitions. Building on Olumba's (2023) concept of cognitive immobility, we sought to understand it through

3 These three features of cognitive immobility align with the analysis, though there may be others.

the lens of Mrs Eve's experiences and those drawn from secondary sources. The findings demonstrate that (im)mobility and life transitions can affect people so that they become cognitively trapped in a location or life experience. Mrs Eve's experiences and expressions highlight the impact of cognitive immobility on mental wellbeing, personal identity and a sense of home and belonging. Among the features of cognitive immobility, this article has identified the persistent re-experience and reconstruction of past events or life experiences, mental immobilisation regarding the past, and a disrupted sense of identity and home.

Despite their diverse backgrounds, Mrs Eve and the individuals drawn from the secondary sources shared a familiar feeling of being trapped in their past. Our findings, in line with the emerging literature on cognitive immobility, suggest the prevalence of this condition in our globalised world and therefore the urgent need for further research and intervention.

Using the framework of cognitive immobility to study the experiences of those who have relocated provides the analytical tools to comprehend better people's cognitive experiences that relate to the past. By processing and understanding their past, we are empowered to support them in the present and better prepare them for the future. The crucial factor is their capacity to live in the present without being ensnared by past locations or life experiences. Individuals suffering from cognitive immobility can forge resilient paths by fostering support networks, practising self-care and self-reflection, and maintaining good health (Swaim, 2022).

The influence of bereavement, trauma, divorce and violence in shaping cognitive immobility requires further exploration. It is important to investigate whether the conditions associated with cognitive immobility hinder or facilitate integration for individuals who have left their homelands to relocate to new places. Such research could yield practical solutions to help individuals overcome cognitive immobility.

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