

Young asylum seekers' conceptions of 'home' at a time of transition to adulthood

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Abstract

This paper discusses findings from qualitative research for an MA dissertation exploring young asylum seekers' (aged 18-25) definitions and experiences of 'home' and 'belonging' at a time of transition to adulthood and adjustment to life in a new country.

Previous research on refugees and asylum seekers has largely focussed on either children or adults, failing to highlight the particular experiences of those in 'the invisible early 20s'¹ (Social Exclusion Unit 2005). It will be argued that young asylum seekers of this age have specific needs and experiences associated with the dual transition they face in both adapting to life in the UK and becoming adults, and also the changing support network and entitlements available to them as they go through this process.

Keywords: Asylum seekers; youth; home; belonging

Introduction

This paper discusses findings from qualitative research from an MA dissertation exploring young asylum seekers' (aged 18-25) definitions and experiences of 'home' and 'belonging' at a time of transition to adulthood and adjustment to life in a new country.

A particular focus will be made on issues of safety and security in housing and neighbourhoods as it was found that feeling comfortable, safe and secure was identified by the young people as being a key factor in feeling 'at home'. Almost all raised this issue as a priority and had very clear conceptions of what they felt they needed in order to create a secure environment. These varied and seemed to be influenced by factors including their past housing experiences and experiences of violence and danger.

The need to establish feelings of safety, security and stability for refugees, with safe and secure housing as a cornerstone, has been widely recognised as a key prerequisite for their successful adaptation and integration into host societies (Ager & Strang 2004; Carter & El-Hassan 2003). Refugees will often have had traumatic and dangerous experiences in their countries of origin and on their journey to the UK (Hynes 2003; Rutter 2003). For children and young people these experiences may have been particularly traumatic (Kohli & Mather 2003). Once they arrive in the UK they may have to contend with a number of issues that could potentially undermine feelings of security such as being interviewed by immigration officials and being at risk of detention and deportation. They may experience racist harassment from various sources in the host community, go through the National Asylum Support System (NASS) dispersal process, experiencing unstable housing provision or be housed in poor, high crime areas (Dennis 2002; Stanley 2001).

It can be argued that an exploration of the young people's perceptions is important as, due to the emergency circumstances of their arrival, the lack of choice in the NASS dispersal system² and their reliance on the limited choices in low cost housing, they are often disempowered in terms of being able to articulate their housing needs to housing providers. Key informants from relevant agencies were consulted, particularly on policies and programmes that have been, and may be, implemented. However, the study gave primacy to the voices of the young people, as the focus was on their subjective experiences of homes and neighbourhoods.

The young people taking part in the study were all asylum seekers at various stages in the asylum process. None had yet attained refugee status. Studies on asylum seekers in the UK often appear, understandably so, to have a prime focus on issues around dispersal and survival. Quilgars et al. (2004: 38) note, 'there is generally a lack of exploration of the more detailed meaning of neighbourhoods and "place" for refugees'. Where research has covered refugees' constructions of home and identity this has often focussed on refugees with permanent status and has not included asylum seekers or those with temporary leave to remain (Haller & Landolt 2005; Kissoon 2006; Means & Sangster 1998; Orellana 1999). This is despite the fact that home is recognised as a process and integration is said to start from day one of arrival. In light of the sometimes temporary nature and multiple experiences of migration, and also transnationalism and increasing restrictions on legal settlement, this research aimed to explore the construction of 'home' as a fluid, evolving process or journey rather than focussing on the settled home here or in their country of origin, thereby exploring the experiences of some asylum seekers to examine the construction and experiences of home and security 'in between'.

Reports such as 'Cold Comfort' (Stanley 2001) and 'A Case for Change' (Dennis 2002) highlighted the particular vulnerability of unaccompanied asylum seeker children (UASC) aged 16 and over who were living independently under Social Services support³. However, there has been little research following on to examine the experiences of these young people after the age of 18, despite the fact that research on the transition to adulthood has recognised that it can be a gradual development stage and young adults continue to have age related social and welfare needs and experiences. In the report, 'Transitions', the Social Exclusion Unit (2005) dubbed this age the 'invisible early 20s' as it claimed that it is often not recognised in youth policies. This, combined with their transition to living in the UK, could create challenges in their housing pathways.

With a focus on their experiences of housing and neighbourhoods, this case study aims to show that those young people leaving care, and those who are over 18 and are newly arrived in the country, exhibit many of the same needs as 16-18 year olds. However, due to the age boundaries in immigration support systems and youth policies, and also welfare restrictions according to immigration status, they are even less likely to receive the support they need.

The term 'yo-yo trajectories' has been used to describe the nature of the transition to adulthood experienced by youth today (EGRIS 2001). It has been argued that the pathway to adulthood is not always a continuous forward progression for many young people and is often renegotiated, moving back and forth. This has been discussed particularly with reference to education and employment and housing experiences. This pattern was evident for the young people in the study and was also

parallel to, and intertwined with, their migration experience with regard to their settlement, integration and sense of belonging.

Literature Review

While there has been research on the reception and integration experiences of asylum seekers, research on forced migrants' constructions of home and identity has often focussed on refugees with permanent status (Haller & Landolt 2005; Means & Sangster 1998; Orellana 1999). This reflects a state centred framework of home where affective identities are recognised within this. Some have argued that citizenship within this framework is central to belonging and it is argued that refugees often have very strong ideas of, and a commitment to, this form of citizenship, which is often why they faced conflict in their countries of origin (Stewart 2005: 509; Porteous 1976). In this context Stewart (2005) writes that the way in which the UK asylum policy assigns the identity of 'asylum seeker' impacts on an individual's self identity and their sense of 'home'. However, while important, this approach risks ignoring the extent to which other affective, unofficial identities are established. It does not take into account the idea of migration, home and identity as processes and that there may be other factors, apart from acquisition of legal citizenship or the right to settle in the UK, which influence feelings of belonging. Meanwhile, refugees may also not automatically achieve a sense of belonging from official citizenship. While legal belonging (as defined by the state) might be an important catalyst for other experiences of belonging it does not necessarily mean it is essential for these processes to start.

Literature on the construction of 'home' highlights the multiple layers, dimensions and sites of its existence. Staeheli & Nagel (2005: 1599) write that home is 'a bundle of

contradictions' that may conjure up feelings of safety and belonging but also be a site of violence and alienation. It may be physically fixed and rooted in place but may also include a more abstract emotional sense of belonging that is not necessarily bounded in this way. Home is seen to be located at an intersection of all the factors. This production appears to come about as a result of interplay between individuals' feelings and actions and activity in the wider social, political and economic structures while ideas of home are affected and influenced by experience. Meanwhile, Somerville (1992: 530) also writes that 'home' can also be an intellectual construction stating; 'people may have a sense of home even though they have no experience or memory of it'. It has been recognised that using an emotionally laden term such as 'home' on spaces that may have included persecution and fear is risky (Kunz 1981: 42). Meanwhile, Ahmed (1999) views the dichotomies of 'home' and 'away' as over simplistic as they are not necessarily oppositional and argues that movement, dislocation and journeys can also take place within homes in the place of origin.

Writings on transnationalism have explored ways in which immigrants' social relationships are constructed to produce trans-national identities, social networks, ways of belonging and assimilation modes (Brycesson & Vuorela 2002; Haller & Landolt 2005; Levitt et al. 2003; Parkin 1999). Many of these studies have been undertaken with economic migrants, temporary migrants or second and third generation migrants. However, unlike young people who migrate as part of family units, those who arrive alone may lack access to parental narratives of the country of origin, while also, as asylum seekers, they are not able to return. Furthermore, bearing in mind their young age at their time of exile, the extent to which they have access to adult memories of their countries of origin can be questioned. Their childhood memories may be of quite a different place. Hoffman (1999: 62) talks of the 'exile from childhood' during the

transition to adulthood as if it is another place while Morley (2006) notes that exile is a temporal, as well as geographical, dislocation and questions what happens when the past is destroyed.

Kunz (1981:46) and Brah (1996: 192) note that the social and political structure of the country of resettlement and the processes of social exclusion/inclusion are vital in establishing the potential for a new home for refugees. Watson and Austerberry (1986) and Douglas (2001) write that 'home' is not just a form of shelter. It is also about space, control, comfort, safety, material conditions, choice, self-expression. In many aspects housing provision for asylum seekers has failed to acknowledge these wider issues. Literature on the integration of refugees and asylum seekers into host communities has found that establishing feelings of security is an essential prerequisite and that a stable housing trajectory is crucial to feeling secure and for integration (Agar & Strang 2004; Carter & El-Hassan 2003; Craig et al. 2004; Pearl & Zetter 2002; Perry 2005; Philips 2005).

Perry (2005: 124) states, 'It's not just about providing physical accommodation, sometimes there has been little attention to the wider support needed'. This could include, for example, isolation from key services, social networks, issues of racial tension, high transport costs (Wilson's 2001). Means and Sangster (1998: 25) discuss how depression and mental health problems caused by past experiences make it very difficult for some asylum seekers to cope with living in accommodation that is isolated from their communities, or where they are sharing with strangers or living in cramped conditions, which can cause claustrophobia. With reference to young people the 'Cold Comfort' (Stanley 2001) and 'A Case for Change' (Dennis 2002) reports noted a lack of support in hostels where young people were left to fend for themselves, were bored and

isolated socially and housed with adults when their age was disputed. Craig et al. (2004a: 34) also comment that, 'Many young refugees are suffering the combined effects of their traumatic experiences in their home country and the loss of, and separation from, their families and homes, and the isolation and boredom of their daily lives here'.

The legal status of asylum seekers and how this affects their welfare has also been examined. Dwyer and Brown (2005) note a 'tiering of entitlement' exists and is used as deterrence and control while the rapid transition between socio-legal statuses can result in homelessness. Both Dwyer & Brown (2005) and Edgar et al. (2004: 103) also found that homelessness can lead to a reliance on fellow expatriates and sometimes vulnerability to exploitation and 'privatisation of assistance'. Edgar et al. (ibid: 127 & 137) note that there is an increase in young and female migrants and that these groups tend to avoid traditional homelessness services. There is a need to examine the needs of migrants in vulnerable positions, not just in terms of their access to mainstream services but also within their 'own communities'.

Studies of asylum seekers in the UK have noted the impact racist harassment can have on their lives here (Ager & Strang 2004; Craig et al. 2004). Chahal and Julienne (1999: 5) write, 'Racist victimisation turns normal, daily activities into assessments of personal safety and security'. Nevertheless, they point out that this is not simply a passive victim status, writing that 'racist victimisation does not make people passive acceptors but proactive strategists' (Chahal & Julienne 1999: 32). Kenrick (2002) discusses the particular advice seeking behaviour of young people and their difficulties in accessing mainstream advice services. However, there appears to be a gap in the literature on how older youth and young single tenants experience racist

harassment in their housing and neighbourhoods. Furthermore, while there is research on the difficulties refugees and asylum seekers face in accessing support in their housing (Perry 2005; Hugh 2004; Craig et al. 2004), there is very little written about young refugees in particular.

Craig et al. (2004a) argue that these causes are not clear-cut and universal. They state, 'Belonging is always open to negotiation and is contingent upon a wide array of factors such as class, age, gender and 'race''. Conflict and belonging appear to be negotiated through a combination of how migrants perceive home here and in their country of origin, how different sections of the 'host' community perceive them and how the migrants *feel* they are perceived resulting in quite individual pathways being taken.

Methodology

The findings are based on a case study research project in an inner-city neighbourhood of Leeds where there is a high density of refugee community groups and support services. A three-session focus group was conducted in an English language class at a young people's resource centre. This was followed by four semi-structured interviews with two males and two females accessing refugee support services in the area. All participants were also given disposable cameras to photograph areas they liked and disliked in their house and neighbourhood. These were then discussed in the focus group and interviews. The photographic element of the research enabled the participants to influence the agendas for the interviews and the focus group by asserting issues that were important to them. The photographs were also used as aids to clarify explanations given in the interviews and focus group. In addition, semi-structured

interviews were also conducted with respondents from key agencies working in the area. The young people's names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Findings

Home and Time

All the young people in this study described their countries of origin as 'home'. However, it was specified that this was their country at a time before the troubles that led to their exile. An interviewee referred to here as 'Khalid' said, '*Nothing in the world is better than your country if there is peace*' (Khalid, age 25). All the young people stated that this 'home' did not exist any more. This reflects Huttunen's (2005) comments that safe public spaces are a key aspect of defining a place as 'home', while it reveals the risk in assuming the emotionally laden term 'home' on a country of origin. It is also an example of the encountering of difference and journeys away from 'home' that can occur without leaving that fixed geographical space (cf Ahmed 1999).

The young people expected to feel safer in the UK but found danger exists here too from racial harassment, detention and deportation. David commented,

Why will you come here? You run away from harassment and intimidation and all those kind of things and you come here and also the same thing is here (David, age 24).

When defining 'home' they all stated that it was somewhere where it could be possible for them to feel safe. For most of them this place did not exist at the moment in

their country of origin or in the UK. Elizabeth described the UK as her *'part time or temporary home'* while her legal status was uncertain (Elizabeth, age 19). Therefore 'home' appeared to be not just a geographical location but also a temporal one located both in the past and future, or at least a particular past and future which was constructed within their particular memory narratives and imagining of the future. They exhibited nostalgia for a remembered home in the past that does not exist any more for them and were dreaming of a potential new home but unable to construct it at present. They appeared to feel that they were in a 'no man's land', in between homes, waiting for access to a safe public space. While they were in this position they weighed up the different dimensions of home; while experiences, such as racial harassment, led them to reconstruct emphasis on what aspects were important, what was possible and also to re-remember childhood homes. For example, David now felt he would rather be poor and lack material possessions than live in a richer European country where *'there is too much bullying'* (David). He now felt nostalgic about a childhood home where he felt he lived in relative poverty with his grandmother. This illustrates how their vision of what home was could be a process, changing and lacking permanence.

The temporal aspect of home also applied to the young people from another angle in that when telling stories of life in their country of origin, it was noticeable that all the young people apart from Khalid (who had left at an older age) told stories of their childhood. For example, Marcia (age 19) told stories of how mothers in her own country discipline children and compared it to the UK and how this would influence the way she disciplined her daughter. Meanwhile, others told stories of the houses they lived in when they were children and their schooling experience. Their memories and narratives were of childhood homes and experiences. This seems to be different to the way in which identity development of migrant young people, who have relationships to parents/older

generation, is reported. Young people who have traveled with their parents may have memories passed down to them, learn about the cultures of the country of origin and have these enforced at times, although this may be through new and changing interpretations of this culture (Buitelaar 2002: 468). They may also have opportunities to visit the country of origin if they are not forced migrants. 'Families' for the young people in this study were their friendship groups and they seemed to lack intergenerational relationships and access to adult memories of the country of origin. Although their friends had commented on their lifestyle, they did not have an older generation attempting to persuade or enforce traditions in exile. Meanwhile, exile from their country also meant exile from childhood for some as experiences of conflict and the process of asylum seeking as well as growing older in this time meant that *some* experienced adult independent living for the first time during their journeys to, and lives in, the UK.

Home as 'normal' life

The young people also defined the existence of home in relation to how 'normal' they felt their life to be. All those who attended college took pictures of their college and described much of their time being spent there (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: it is the major part of my life and that's the only bit of life that I actually have and that's what I find myself doing all the time..going to college (Elizabeth).

They all wanted to be in education or employment and have a meaningful existence or what a couple referred to as a 'normal' life. This reflected Stewart's comments that 'asylum seekers defined themselves as other in relation to their construction of normality' (Stewart 2005). Some young people also expressed frustration over the restriction and delays in being able to make the transition to adulthood in terms of their work and career progression as being asylum seekers they could not obtain funding for higher education and did not have the right to work. Some of those who had arrived under the age of 18 had been given Indefinite Leave to Remain until the age of 18 and found that once their immigration position was again in question they lost education and work rights which they had previously had. Although most of the respondents were attempting to make social connections and create a life for themselves in the UK, the lack of permanence in their home made it difficult to integrate and establish themselves in other areas of their lives. Elizabeth had initially questioned whether it was worth forming emotional attachments and making social connections when she still had temporary status in the UK.

I didn't make friends in my first year ...I didn't know if I was going to be sent home...I just felt I don't want to start being emotionally attached to people if I might be sent home (Elizabeth).

She changed her mind a year later as she said; *'I just felt that also I can't stay in the country for that long and not make friends and it just happened (Elizabeth).* This suggests a feeling of a need for something more than a temporary shelter. Khalid also noted the difficulty of living with an unknown future in the UK. He said; *"I live here but I*

don't know my future...appeal, court, the days are gone...the age is go...you not allowed to work..you know just sitting in the house!"(Khalid). He also stated that he had completed several college courses which he enjoyed but at the same time felt there was little point as he would not be allowed to work and may not be able to stay in the UK.

Khalid and Elizabeth both spoke of the restrictions and difficulties in establishing 'normal' patterns of living when staying in bed & breakfasts or hostels. Khalid found it difficult having to stay outside the whole day. He described his happiness at being given a 'permanent' address.



Fig. 2: *'Just you feel you are in prison but someone who gets address .you feel freedom, citizen'* (Khalid).

Meanwhile, Elizabeth found it difficult to socialise while living in a hostel. She stated; *'It wasn't a place to bring your college friends to..it was just friends that were in the hostel..'* (Elizabeth). Douglas (1991) writes that space is turned into a home by bringing it under control. These young people do not seem to have access to such controls and sometimes seemed to have physical shelter at the expense of certain freedoms. Elizabeth stated;

The surroundings are not very nice and they have to buzz you in and ask who it is...cause when I stayed there for a year and they asking 'Who is it? Who is it? Who is it?'. It was annoying me. (Elizabeth)

All those interviewed stated that much of their socialising was at friends' houses and most took photographs of groups of friends in their houses. Therefore these restrictions inhibited their ability to socialize and also caused frustration as they lacked the control over their space and freedom, which they associated with adult life. Most of the young people wanted to live on their own so they could have control over their own lifestyle and be independent but still have access to friends as sometimes they didn't want to be on their own.

Some acknowledged that staying initially in hostels or shared houses had provided them with the opportunity for forming friendships with other asylum seekers. Elizabeth and Marcia had made their closest friends in the hostels they were housed in initially. Both also relied on sharing living space with friends to give them emotional support. Elizabeth stayed with her friend as she felt better staying there while her appeal was being examined. Marcia often had a friend staying the night with her in her flat which also made her feel safer. However, they had both also experienced sharing space with people who made them feel uncomfortable and unsafe. Elizabeth reported drug users, and difficult behaviour in her hostel. She commented on the problems of sharing living space with males. This reinforces previous research findings of some young people being housed in inappropriate hostel provision (Stanley 2001; Dennis 2002).

Counter-narratives on home

Despite this feeling of lack of control and choice, some young people did challenge hegemonic or official ideas of belonging and citizenship and used counter-narratives in response. For example, David stated,

I am from Africa...so that's why you say me I am not supposed to be here...but me I am free. I am a citizen of the world (David 24).

Elizabeth joined an activist group challenging UK immigration policy and supporting anti-deportation campaigns, while Khalid had lived with local squatters supporting destitute asylum seekers and felt a sense of belonging within this group's values. This reflects Ehrkamp and Leitner's (2006) discussion of how migrants create new symbolic spaces of belonging in sometimes hostile host societies. It also illustrates Amin (2002) and Martiniello's (1998) comments that host communities are not homogeneous. The young people's experiences show that not all reception was hostile and they had been able to find spaces in which they felt some sense of acceptance and belonging.

The young people's comments reflected the multi-layered nature of belonging in their localized, but also supranational, locating of home. Although they all identified themselves as being of particular nationalities, they had quite localised definitions of home within those countries. This was most evident when discussing the possibility of return. Most had been told at immigration appeals that it was safe for them to return to other parts of their country. All stated they feared such returns, as they had no attachment, or sense of belonging, to these areas which they had never visited and where they had no family or friends.

Many lacked family links and access to an older generation but still had transnational links. All those of African origin described themselves as African and expressed desire to live in other parts of Africa while forming their closest friendships with other African young people. As well as geographical transnational connections, there were also cultural ones. Marcia, an Angolan, watched Brazilian soap operas and listened to Brazilian music, in Portuguese, her first language. Although she spoke good English, her friendship group was comprised exclusively of people from Portuguese speaking countries. Meanwhile, Elizabeth, Amal and Khalid expressed a religious identity and formed friendships and networks with others on this basis. Transnational links were also maintained through political activities and this was also a mechanism through which their identity evolved and linked host and home countries. For example, Khalid had attended conferences, given interviews to a national newspaper and appeared on a radio programme to talk about his country and experiences of refugees from there in the UK.

Research on migrants and transnational identities has focused on how they actively seek out maintaining connections to their countries of origin. However, David and Khalid raised the matter that cultivating these links could also lead to less desirable links. The situations they had escaped from were also believed to have the potential to reach across national borders. Both discussed their fears of spies within the immigrant communities in the UK disclosing details of their whereabouts and activities to the governments in their home countries. They all voiced the importance of interacting or being around people they trusted in order to establish feelings of safety. David said he avoided contact with people from his country. He commented;

No I stay away you know...I don't know when you know...I don't want too much exposure you know. I am very lonely like (David).

When asked if they could ever regard the UK as their home, Marcia saw Leeds and particular inner city areas as her home. She said that she felt more comfortable in Leeds than London because it is more quiet and peaceful and she is from the countryside in her home country. Khalid and Elizabeth were uncertain. Both discussed the difficulty of regarding the UK as home when their status is uncertain. Both had been through immigration appeals and were undergoing further appeals when this research was undertaken. They felt unwelcomed by experiences of hostility from officials and sections of the host communities that did not understand what they had experienced or why they were here and had a feeling of being judged without being understood.

Friends, support and exploitation

When they first arrived in the UK Elizabeth and Marcia were housed and supported by older women of the same nationality with contacts to their family. As noted above both David and Khalid to different degrees did not trust some people from their own ethnic communities. However, while Khalid had doubts he did not extend this to everyone of his ethnic group and had relied on them for orientation on arriving in Leeds and for support when he was homeless and he had also helped others. David, however, now avoided anyone from his country. While he was homeless in London, he was occasionally allowed to stay at the house of people from the same country but was sometimes locked out or turned away and felt let down by them. On two occasions he had become dependent on friends for housing which was unstable. Both Khalid and David also spoke of relying on voluntary sector support both financially and emotionally.

Khalid talked of being looked after by a group of squatters who were active in supporting asylum seekers. Meanwhile, David spoke of his use of a drop in centre for destitute asylum seekers and took photos of his friends here.

Home as safety and defining safety

As can be seen by the comments made by Khalid earlier, the need to establish feelings of safety, security and stability was a key aspect in identifying a space as home (cf Ager & Strang 2003; Carter & El-Hassan 2003). The young people all specified challenges to their feelings of safety coming from two sources, firstly, the risk of their asylum claim failing and the temporary nature of their homes here and, secondly, fear of crime in their area of residence.

While there was a greater fear of return if they were near the end of the appeals process, there was also a greater fear for personal safety from crime in the UK as they no longer felt able to access legal protection. This was particularly the case when their immigration status was uncertain. Khalid spoke of how when his immigration appeal failed and he was homeless and living in a park (Fig. 3) he felt unable to access emergency services.



Fig. 3: *'So I can't call the police and I can't call the ambulance because..because I call the police, they catch me, put me in prison. I go to my country get killed.'* (Khalid).

As well as worrying about their asylum claims and the affect this had on their housing and security, young people had the additional concern that Indefinite Leave to Remain, if given, often ends when they reach 18 years old (Stanley 2001; Dennis 2002).

While some patterns emerged in terms of the places in which they perceived a risk of crime and the reasons why, the explanations were quite heterogeneous due to each individual's multiplicity of identities and past experiences. Some but not all identified their status as an ethnic minority or an asylum seeker as making them vulnerable to attacks and preferred to live in areas with a high density of ethnic minorities, although they were specific about *which* ethnic minority. Elizabeth in contrast did not at any point mention this as being a risk factor. She defined a safe area as somewhere she saw other young girls walking around. She felt afraid being housed on a floor in a hostel where there were mainly men and was afraid walking back from college alone as a young woman (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4: 'I not seen young girls of my age walking alone so I think that it is not safe.. If there is a gang of boys walking in front or walking behind I feel I must walk slow so I don't catch up with them or walk very fast so they don't catch up with me (Elizabeth).

Some did not identify aspects of their own identity as making them targets, or if they did, also identified perpetrator centred causes. For example, David referred to the 'hooligan' nature of his perpetrators. Nabile (age 19) and Ahmed (age 23) from the focus group also referred to 'rude' local boys. Marcia, Khalid and Elizabeth blamed alcohol and drugs as influencing people to harass them

All the young people stated that noise levels in a neighbourhood indicated how safe it was, although they had conflicting ideas as to whether it was noise or quiet which was dangerous. Visible drug dealing and policing, media reports of attacks on asylum seekers, visible deprivation and poor quality of housing also made the young people feel uncomfortable living in an area. Some took photographs of derelict or poorly maintained houses and stated they were nervous being near them (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5: *'Some of the houses are like this. There is problems in this area' (Khalid)*

Most of the young people mentioned violent and traumatic experiences in their countries of origins and often linked this to subsequent experiences and attitudes to living in their UK homes. Marcia told of how she had witnessed her father's murder. She had regular nightmares, attempted suicide when she first began to live alone and often felt unable to stay in her house by herself. Meanwhile, David described how his mental health on arrival prevented him from accessing support and resulted in him being homeless for over a year. He said;

I am constantly fear and worry about my life because what I see I never see that in my whole life. You know and that time I was about 18/19. Very young to experience that kind of stuff you understand so me the time I arrived in England here I was mental. I am just on my own on the street. People they just take me as a crazy person. You know so ...they don't know what is happening with my life (David).

Safety fears were also influenced by personal experiences of attacks or hearing of attacks on friends. Almost all research participants mentioned experiences of racist harassment. David spoke of becoming afraid due to attacks he had experienced.

I tell you since that attack I am scared. I am scared of white people. I thought that anybody who is approaching me or who is talking to me they just... (makes hitting gesture) (David).

Finally, there were not always such obvious risks between perceived safety and actual risks. For example, if Marcia had nightmares and felt afraid she would sometimes go to the phone box outside her house in the middle of the night, in a high crime neighbourhood to call her boyfriend. She felt safer on the street at night talking to him than alone in her own house.

Racist harassment

All interviewees mentioned experiences of racist harassment while males were more likely to have experienced physical violence than females. A caseworker from Leeds Racial Harassment Project (LRHP) confirmed this statistic. Elizabeth, David and Marcia all mentioned experiencing or witnessing attacks in front of or in their homes. Marcia also mentioned damage to her property. As a result she felt safer when there were more barriers between her and outside. Instead of living in a house she would have liked to be a few floors up in a block of flats but housing associations do not regard these flats as suitable for people with young children and she had a baby.

The young people and the respondents from agencies working in the area all indicated that those who were new to an area appeared to be most at risk, as they didn't know the danger spots and were dependent on housing workers, friends and neighbours telling them where these were. They were also less likely to know the official mechanisms available for dealing with harassment. Those who were destitute and/or homeless were also particularly vulnerable to attack, but at the same time they were those in the most legally insecure positions and the least able to access help. There was a lack of access to support projects and a fear of police and detention.

The young people had utilized the different responses reflecting those noted by Chahal and Julienne (1999). Marcia and David had reported the incidents to the police, although David said he would not do so now as his immigration status was less secure. They had not used the services of the LRHP, although they had been sent letters by them. They found the paper work too time consuming in addition to dealing with their immigration cases. LRHP have youth workers who undertake work in schools but do not tend to work with this older age group of clients.

In response to harassment all the young people had changed their routine and avoided certain areas or certain areas at particular times of day. In the past Marcia had experienced racial harassment from her neighbour who was an alcoholic and had threatened to attack her. She ignored him and tried to avoid leaving and entering the house when he was around.

The young people also relied on their friends, staying at their houses or having them over to stay with them. The LRHP caseworker stated that 18-25 year olds are often at an age when they are single adults and living alone and therefore are alone

when dealing with harassment. For three of the young people their homes had become part time homes or did not feel safe staying on their own there. Some males chose to confront their attackers, particularly if they were also young people. David told of how he had confronted youths who attacked him in a phone box outside his flat.

Some asylum seekers and refugees are re-housed but, as stated by police Hate Crime Co-coordinators and the LRHP caseworker, areas with available housing have social problems too. David also feared being re-housed in case he lost his right to housing altogether. The study was too small to identify firm patterns yet seemed to support recent Home Office (Anie et al. 2005) findings linking areas of high deprivation with greater likelihood of assaults on asylum seekers. Police Hate Crime Co-ordinators and the LRHP caseworker also identified deprivation as being a key feature of racist harassment hotspots. Two young people in the focus group who were housed in an affluent suburb in Leeds had not experienced harassment and felt safe, but they had to travel for all activities as facilities were not in place in the area as they appear to have been built up around density of need. However, it could be argued that other factors such as an area's ethnic composition and history of housing migrants and community consultation are also important rather than simply levels of deprivation.

Conclusion

Home for the young people in this study can be seen to be multilayered and multidimensional, incorporating both material and emotional aspects, private and public space and local, national and transnational attachments. It was geographically and temporally divided, fluid and changing, affected by interplay between the development of personal feelings and identity and wider structural possibilities and constraints. Their

journeys and experiences in exile have emphasized the importance of and need for different aspects at different times.

Voiced with reference to their experiences of persecution, insecurity and harassment in their country of origin and the UK, being able to feel safe and secure was a cornerstone to being able to reconstruct an idea of home. However, due to their lack of permanent legal entitlement to settlement in the UK and experiences of harassment here, none of the respondents felt safe. There appeared to be a feeling that they were to some extent in a 'no man's land', waiting for access to safe public space. They felt nostalgia towards a home in they remembered in the past, while dreamt of a potential new home which they could envisage, but did not have access to construct at present. The UK was sometimes seen as a part time, temporary home until this could be resolved.

However, while the need for legal security was paramount to establishing a home, without access to this, most had challenged hegemonic and official narratives of belonging and posed alternative narratives which enabled them to belong at some level, reflecting Brah's comments on "political and personal struggles over the social regulation of 'belonging'" (Brah 1996). For example, David described himself as a 'citizen of the world' which entitled him to live wherever he wanted, while Elizabeth, David and Khalid had all continued their political and cultural activities into their UK lives and now used these as mediums for voicing their viewpoint on their right to remain. Elizabeth was also establishing an anti-deportation campaign for herself in which she stated her social connectedness to her UK community. Most of the young people were constructing social connections here through learning English, making friends in the local communities, attending college and taking part in community groups.

All had attempted to bridge aspects of their homes in their countries of origin with their new UK homes. However, as asylum seekers and as separated young people these approaches appear to differ from other trends noted in writing on migrants and transnationalism. In particular, the lack of access to an older generation of family meant the way in which they maintained links to the country of origin differed. Khalid also noted that they had more freedom and individual choice in the extent to which they adopted UK culture and identities.

All the young people felt that establishing feelings of safety and security in their homes centred on attaining a legal right to remain permanently in the UK and being free from harassment here. However, there was a great deal of variation as to the type of housing provision that would make them feel safe here. Common factors included noise levels in the area, ethnic diversity, levels of crime and visible policing, transport provision, friendliness of neighbours and who they shared housing space with. Attitudes to these factors varied according to their specific life histories and individual experiences.

It was notable that the rigidity of the asylum support system and limited resources and location of available housing stock meant that many of these individual needs were not catered to. Definitions and criteria of what is 'suitable' housing appeared to be according to quite physical based and homogenous definitions of refugee identities. For example, housing providers viewed high-rise flats not to be suitable for young families and felt asylum seekers preferred sharing with those who speak the same language. However, most of the young people also identified their housing needs on the basis of their specific experiences of trauma or harassment and their mental

health needs, which sometimes contradicted expected needs according to housing provider definitions.

Some young people did use official mechanisms to attempt to establish their safety. For example, some reported incidents to the police and/or requested rehousing. However, most also, or instead relied on other methods as described by Chahal and Julienne (1999). These included ignoring perpetrators, confronting them, changing routines and relying on friends for support, in particular staying at their houses or having them over to stay. As single adults living independently, this friendship support appeared to be a substitute for the family support described by Chahal and Julienne's (ibid) respondents. Those most limited in their means of response were new arrivals or those at the end of the appeals process. These were also those most at risk due to either their lack of knowledge of an area and or their experience of unstable housing and homelessness.

In conclusion it was found that both the ontological idea of home and belonging and the extent to which this was felt to be realised were constantly being renegotiated throughout the young people's migration pathways so far. This was occurring in parallel to, and intertwined with, their transition to adulthood which was also not a simple linear journey.

Notes

¹ This term was used in the Social Exclusion Unit's 2005 report Transitions to describe the experience of young people in their early 20s in the UK who were in an age bracket that many youth policies do not extend to.

2 The Immigration Act 1999 introduced a system of dispersal where asylum seekers are dispersed to housing in different regions of the UK to reduce pressures on local councils in London and the South East of England.

³ Unaccompanied young asylum seekers aged 16-18 are cared for by social services mostly under Section 17 where they live independently in hostels or social housing.

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