

Belongings Beyond Borders: reflections of young refugees on their relationships with
location

Abstract

Young separated refugees are exiled from familiar places and on seeking asylum encounter new, potentially alienating, places. Yet, there is limited research regarding the effects of location on the psychological experiences of young separated refugees. This study explores the relationships that young adults who arrived in the UK as separated refugees have with the spaces that they inhabit and the consequences of these. It draws on qualitative interviews with young men from Iraq and Afghanistan who are living in London. Four key themes emerged from the analysis. Participants felt frustrated in bureaucratic settings where processes of labelling and physical manipulation prevented their sense of subjectivity from being expressed. Certain community spaces offered a rich range of support. Micro-spaces of belonging and embodied processes of exploration in the wider community were also reported to be psychologically beneficial. The themes suggest that considerations of young separated refugees' relations to place may provide alternative psychological understandings of their experiences, particularly in relation to concepts such as trauma. Policy implications related to immigration control and the benefits of community projects are highlighted.

Keywords young separated refugees; place; space; trauma; belonging; embodiment

In 2013 the United Kingdom received 23,507 new applications for asylum (UNHCR, 2015).

Of these approximately 1000 will have been separated from parents and responsible adults

(Refugee Council, 2012). Being forcibly displaced can involve losses and breaks from family, home, social relations, community, culture, familiar geographical landscapes, country - 'the entire social fabric in which they were born and have managed to find their distinct place in the world' (Arendt, 1982, p.276). This is likely to be particularly difficult for young, separated refugees but there is a lack of research on how the new places that they live in and move through can affect their psychological experiences. This reflects the relative neglect of the idea that our psychological activity and the identities we enact are contingent on the spaces in which we are located (Tucker, 2010a).

However, a theoretical emphasis on context and its centrality to psychological processes has emerged in relatively recent social, health and community psychology research (Dixon & Durrheim, 2004, Hodgetts et al, 2007, Tucker, 2010a, & Tucker, 2010b). It has been argued that a focus on spatial, material and relational dimensions is essential if we are to understand 'issues of social relations and health' (Hodgetts et al, 2007). For Tucker (2010a) an approach that moves beyond bio-cognitive frameworks to explore the habitual spaces and spatial interactions of users of mental health services allows the 'very reality of their being in the world' to be considered (p.536). Such contextual orientations towards psychological experience are influenced by broader social scientific theory. In particular, the field of human geography has developed alternative accounts of space as fluid and produced through heterogeneous practices, which are in turn recursively shaped by it (Massey, 2005 & Thrift, 2007). When Massey (2008, p.9) states 'we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far' she highlights that our stories are shaped by space. This paper seeks to add to psychological research that draws on spatial approaches through an analysis of the relationships of young adults that arrived in the UK as separated refugees with the everyday spaces they encountered and continue to encounter.

Merleau-Ponty (2014) asserted that our sense of subjectivity is mediated through the body and that psychological activity is enmeshed within social matrixes and constructed jointly through intricate relationships with others. Such embodied understandings of being have influenced definitions of place as recursively constructed through social forces as well as the everyday practices of people. Psychological research on refugees has tended to focus on their pre-flight experiences and in doing this has drawn on a discourse of trauma, in particular the syndrome of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Summerfield, 2000; Papadopoulos; 2005). This has the effect of locating the distress associated with experiencing traumatic events within the individual with a consequent neglect both of the context in which those events occurred and the contexts in which refugees subsequently live (Summerfield, 2000; Lemma & Young, 2010; Papadopoulos, 2005, Sloan, 1997). It creates a framework in which multiple layers of past and present factors, including location, are downplayed (Tucker, 2010a; Papadopoulos, 2005).

The concept of PTSD has been the focus of much critical analysis (e.g. Summerfield, 2001, Summerfield, 2000) and psychosocial models have been proposed that question the universalism of PTSD. They aim to move beyond a focus on the ‘traumatic’ pre-flight experiences of refugees to one which incorporates understandings of other stages; such as the journey into exile and resettlement in host countries (Papadopoulos, 2005; Losi, 2006). Such approaches highlight how multiple disconnections from established networks of support can potentially induce feelings of depression, anxiety, alienation and cultural bereavement (Bhugra & Becker, 2005; Stedman, 1999; Summerfield, 2000). Research that analyses embodied experiences of place reveals the important non-pathological relations and patterns

of stability that can be interactively produced through space. (Tucker, 2010a). The importance of everyday places to young separated refugees has been demonstrated in research by Sinha (2008) who conducted a qualitative study of young migrants in East London. The predominantly Muslim participants described experiences of hostility in local spaces from other residents, including those from multi-ethnic backgrounds. However, the study also showed that certain local spaces, such as community centers and colleges, often provided safe sites of resistance in which young separated migrants could experience feelings of belonging and wellbeing.

Papadopoulos (2005) has explored extensively what home means and what it may mean for refugees to lose it. Home is made up of a number of everyday 'tangible and intangible entities' such as familiar 'sounds', 'smells,' and 'geographical landscapes' that form what is described as a 'mosaic substratum of human experience' (Papadopoulos, 2005, p.17). This can facilitate the 'sense of predictability of how human beings behave, of what to expect of life, i.e. how to 'read life' (Papadopoulos, 2005, p.18). Therefore, losing our home and sense of place in the world can create a sense of loss (Papadopoulos, 2005). Yet, although there is much work that indicates the importance of place to emotional wellbeing there has been limited research on the importance of place to the psychological experiences of young separated refugees. The current study will therefore focus on the accounts of young adults that arrived in the UK as separated refugees of their relationships to place and the embodied meanings that they give to the different spaces they use. A more refined understanding of these issues may help in the development of understandings of the refugee experience that are less influenced by concepts of stress and that give greater recognition to the role of context and place.

Method

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of East London School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee. Participants were recruited through posters displayed in a community-based project that specialises in providing support to young refugees and migrants. It is located in a community centre situated within a deprived multi-cultural area of East London. No rewards were offered for taking part in the study.

The main inclusion criterion was that potential participants had arrived in the UK as unaccompanied minors. However, to ensure that they had the experience required to reflect on their relationships to place participants were also required to have lived in the UK for a number of years. The inclusion criteria also specified that participants were males from Iraq and Afghanistan so as to reflect the fact that the majority of young separated refugees in recent years have been males from both those countries (Refugee Council, 2012).

There were fifteen potential participants. Some indicated that they did not want to think or talk about their past whilst others stated that they were too busy to meet up, giving six participants in total: three from Afghanistan and three from Iraq. Participants were 20 to 23 years of age, none were married, five lived in flats on their own and one with a friend. Four of the participants were in further education, one worked full-time and a sixth was unemployed. All six participants entered the UK in 2007 as 'asylum seekers' but three had recently been granted 'Indefinite Leave to Remain' (ILR) in the UK by the Home Office. Two participants were awaiting decisions from the Home Office on whether they were to be granted ILR. One participant had 'Discretionary Leave to Remain' in the UK and was in the process of applying for an extension of it.

One to one semi-structured interviews were conducted in the participants' own homes. They averaged forty minutes in duration and were designed to be as open, value free and non-directive as possible. Questions focused on places that participants found peaceful and comfortable and on places that they did not find peaceful or comfortable. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and all names and identifying features were changed to protect anonymity.

Inductive Thematic Analysis was chosen as the method for analysing the data because it is epistemologically open (Braun and Clark, 2006) and enabled the material and contextual realities that shaped participants' lived experiences (such as access to appropriate housing) to be addressed. The analysis followed the steps outlined by Braun and Clark (2006). Immersion in the data was achieved by repeated readings of the transcripts in an active way that allowed ideas on patterns and meanings to emerge (Braun & Clark, 2006). Notes on possible codes were made at this stage. This phase was followed by a more detailed systematic analysis of the transcripts that produced initial codes. These codes were then organised into meaningful groups (Braun & Clark, 2006). The codes were then reanalysed and arranged into broader groups that formed initial themes. The themes were then reviewed and data within them recoded into sub-themes and master themes. This process resulted in certain themes being discarded and others being collapsed. The final stage of analysis involved defining and naming the themes.

Analysis & Discussion

The analysis produced four main themes: Bounded by Bureaucracy, At Home In the Community, A Place of One's Own and Wide and Textured Contexts.

Bounded by Bureaucracy

Five of the six participants stated that in formal institutional settings such as the Home Office and Job Centre they felt judged and controlled by the systems and staff within those places. Institutional settings appeared to bind participants in metaphoric ways through bureaucratic force.

Participants perceived staff in institutional settings as viewing them through labels that flattened their identities. When in those spaces they felt as if they were framed through negative one-dimensional labels such as criminal, beggar or bogus, reflecting hostile dominant discourses that portray asylum seekers and refugees as unsafe and un-genuine: a threat to the state and its resources (Back, 2007; Sinha, 2008). The following extracts, in which Ali and Karim talk about their experiences of visiting the Home Office and Job Centre, illustrate this.

Ali

You go there and it's a bit scary, you see people that around you that... You feel like they are not... your type, you feel like you are better than them, you, you shouldn't be here you know, this place to come and sign because you haven't done anything wrong and... when sometime they have to look at your face and they ask you a few questions.

Karim

Because you know, especially the Home Office, you know, you don't have leave to remain, they, they look at you different to other people... Job Centre is, it depends on the person, helping you, talking to you... Some of them it's like they think... ...They think, they think they are giving money from their pocket...

In describing how staff looked at his face and asked him questions Ali's account suggests that reporting to the Home Office felt like an interrogation, even though he had done nothing wrong. His assertion that he felt 'better' than the other refugees around him is suggestive, because he appears to be viewing them through the refracted gaze of the discourses that label him as 'criminal' or 'bogus', someone who needs to be monitored carefully (Sinha, 2008). He positions himself, perhaps, as morally superior to those other refugees.

Karim's account shows how he feels 'othered' when he is in the socio-spatial context of the Home Office and Job Centre. For instance, he describes how certain staff viewed him as different from them and like a beggar. There is a sense from both participants' accounts that they were deeply frustrated by the way that the labels seemed to bind them so tightly that their own sense of subjectivity could not be expressed.

A consistent theme was that interviewees felt forced in bureaucratic settings to move their bodies in meaningless ways that took up a lot of their time. The following extracts illustrate this:

Rashid

Um... I don't know, I didn't like the signing thing at all cause when I had to go there, it's only for five, ten minutes but I have to travel all the way from my house there and then like just for nothing, and just like five minutes of signing and then that's you. I feel horrible man, it's like you wake up you go somewhere for nothing, it's like you're just wasting your time.

Karim

I hate the Home Office and Job Centre... because for example sometimes they can play with your mind, they can make you angry and you can't do anything with it. You have for example, in the Home Office I used to go to sign, I was waiting for two hours in the queue and they don't mind, they don't think you, you, I was thinking that these people in the queue they're all human but they don't feel like that, they make you angry but you can't do anything with it, you know what I mean? Because they, I dunno, they have a power, they can do whatever.

Rashid and Karim both discuss how their sense of self was impacted by the ways in which their bodies were manipulated by forces beyond their control when in, or on en route to, bureaucratic places. Karim shows an acutely frustrated awareness of the power relations that his forced physical movements signified when he discusses how 'they' 'have a power' and could 'play' with his mind while he had no power at all.

Furthermore, Rashid and Karim's discussions highlight how the body, the mind, the environment and societal forces are interlocked through fluid and recursive relations (Tucker, 2010a). In this particular context psychological feelings of being bound and frustrated flow from the way that institutions move young separated refugees' bodies so as to allow

monitoring, which has no meaning to those who are being monitored, to take place. This illustrates the psychologically uncomfortable effects that dominant immigration discourses and political mechanisms can have on young separated refugees (Sinha, 2008; Back, 2007). Bureaucratic processes label and physically manipulate young separated refugees as they navigate an alien environment that treats them as overtly alien. This emphasises the importance of young refugees having spaces that they feel comfortable and peaceful within; spaces that can help to counteract the effects of institutional contexts.

At Home in the Community

When asked about places where they felt comfortable and peaceful all interviewees mentioned the community centre. The centre is a place that all the participants received regular support when they first arrived in the UK. It provided advice and advocacy support on issues such as immigration as well as social support through a youth club and group activities. All the participants still occasionally visit the centre to see staff or friends. The acknowledgement of a site where young refugees can feel comfortable reinforces Sinha's (2008) assertion that within communities there are places of belonging that resist the dominant discourses exerted in other areas, such as institutional contexts. Sarwar and Ali when discussing why the centre makes them feel comfortable, said

Sarwar

...You know it's a good place for me. I feel like home, like I've got friends...like I've got people to care about me...

Ali

...It was like my home and there was a big family there...

This emphasis on 'home' echoes findings from Lemma's (2010) study into a key-working intervention, which found that its ability to provide a 'surrogate home place' through its location was central to its therapeutic success (p.413). Places that induce a sense of home may be especially important for refugees; '..."loss of home is the only condition that all refugees share, not trauma' (Papadopoulos, 2005, p.9).

The descriptions that participants gave of the community centre indicate that it had acted as a foundation on which they could build initial processes of belonging, facilitated by the practical support offered by staff.

Ali

Especially when you are new to the country you need these places a lot, you know but when you are grown up you still need them, so they help you a lot when you are new to the country you know, they develop you and they encourage you and when you grow up you keep them...

Ali emphasises how essential the practical help was when he first arrived. This echoes the emphasis in the psychosocial literature on including the present, contextual needs of young separated refugees when considering what support they may need (Kohli, 2006; Wessells, 2012). The language that Ali used also suggests that this support shaped the space into a concrete place that, like both a welcoming home and 'secure base', he could travel back to (Bowlby, 1988). His descriptions of how you still 'need them' and 'keep them' when grown up suggests that the centre is akin to a 'family' home. Like other participants he conveys an attachment to the place that appears to be engendered through the fundamental nature of the

support regularly 're-encountered' and 're-connected' with there (Papadopoulos, 2005, p.14).

Karim, summed this up during his discussion of the centre when he said

Karim

*I feel like I have something, how do you say...something's protecting you
...which we call in Iraq something behind you, if you need anything there is a place
you can go...*

A second facet of the centre that makes it somewhere the participants associate with peace and comfort is the relationships that they have formed there. The formation of collective identities appears central to the positive sense of belonging and place identity that they associate with the centre. In particular, participants seemed to value that many of the people who they met in the centre were in a similar situation to their own.

Sarwar

*...Most of them, is in the same situation, so you know you are not
alone, you're not the only one on that boat, you got people that are there, that
have got the same problem that you've got, that's what makes it good as
well... I'm the only one who has a difficult story, ...*

Sarwar mentions how meeting people that he shared such significant commonalities with meant that he did not feel 'alone'. Phrases such as 'you're not the only one on the boat' suggest that the relationships he formed within the centre were mutually supportive, providing opportunities to share 'difficult' stories with others in a social context. This

contrasts with and may help alleviate the sense of alienation that participants experience in bureaucratic settings such as the Job Centre. In turn, their negative feelings towards such controlled spaces may have strengthened their appreciation of relational spaces in which they can relax.

A Place of One's Own

Participants described their own homes as comfortable and peaceful, using language that conveyed interrelated feelings of independence and control as well as safety and relaxation. The freedom to do what they want, within the boundaries of their own space, contributed to their perception of home as a peaceful place. Five of the six participants were accommodated in hostels prior to receiving their own accommodation and one in foster care. Those who had lived in hostels found them noisy and intrusive. Typically, most participants had to wait around four years before receiving their own accommodation. This wait and restrictions in institutionalized spaces appear to have contributed to the positive meanings they attach to home.

Rashid

... Cause it's your own house you just go there, do whatever you like and just relax and stuff no one is going to say to you what are you doing here.

Ali

Well it, this house... mean everything to me because this is the place no one bother me, no one talk to me in a bad way... And when I'm studying... You see my papers everywhere, three days ago, my papers were from here to this area and then

there ... It's like you know because every day I do exam and I put them together and open them again...

Rashid and Ali both discuss how in their home-spaces they could relax their bodies and behave in ways that contrasted with the bodily control they experienced in institutional settings. The participants' experiences of control at home are strengthened through the fact that they can choose what to do in the space: they can relax, they can socialise, and they can study. These activities are formed through actions that produce their ongoing experiences of the space. Tucker (2010a) notes that homes do not pre-exist the activities within them, thus we are faced with the task of constantly remaking space, of 'anchoring it' so as to enable the perception of 'some form of stability' (Tucker, 2010a, p.535). Ali, for instance, when he is studying, places his papers across the floor in piles. The fact that he can repeatedly enact this spatialised activity without disruption, produces the space as one of control and therefore comfort (Tucker, 2010a), in marked contrast to "official" spaces.

The events that force young separated refugees to seek asylum are normally dangerous. Thus, to regain control and independence in certain places, even domestic micro-spaces of belonging, may help to promote feelings of safety and relaxation. This is highlighted by the way that participants closely interweaved the themes of safety and relaxation together in their narratives.

Yacob

It is a safe place you know, um, you know like I said when sometimes you're laying in your bed you sometimes get paranoid, get scared you know and just, just the fact you put your head under the blanket you feel a lot safer, you know. I mean it's pretty safe around here as well but as you walk into your house you close the door

you feel like you're protected, even though...anyone you know can...break into your house, but it's the feeling, you feel safe.

Yacob shows that home is a place where he feels both secure and relaxed by blending the two concepts through his analogy of home being like a comforting blanket. He acknowledges that even though the experience of home as safe may only be a perception it doesn't matter; what does matter is that he has a place in which he can *feel* that way. The importance that participants attach to having a stable place to live reinforces the narrowness of trauma discourses which de-contextualise refugees' present experiences (Summerfield, 2000; Summerfield, 1995).

Wide and Textured Contexts

The accounts that participants gave of their home-spaces as comfortable are embedded within narratives that describe the communities that they are situated in as peaceful places. Overall, participants show a strong sense of attachment to where they live.

Karim

...I live in this area and this is my favourite area because all the six years, five years and a half I have been in this area. And I live in this area, all this area, that's why I feel it's my home in London.

It is perhaps surprising that participants in the present research felt such a positive sense of attachment to their local areas, in light of Sinha's (2008) study into the discriminatory exclusion that young separated migrants in East London experienced. Yet, participants'

narratives convey that they perceive the areas in which they are located as comforting due to the myriad ways that they have shaped them into richly textured territories to live and move through.

The sense of belonging that participants feel seems to stem from embodied explorations that through habitual movements make and remake personal territories. Territories in this sense are not boundaried physical entities that statically pre-exist but instead echo Tucker's (2010b) definition of place as 'acts' created through the 'multiple systems of relation between human and non-human phenomena' (p.3). Physical activity that allows participants to repeatedly interact with a space is central to this process

Ali

I start to walk to the river and to know that I'm not far ... when you move to a new place it takes time to cause you need to walk around to discover the area you cannot just... People if they tell you it's okay but if you discover it by yourself then you will remember it easy.

Ali's extract demonstrates an appreciation of the independence and freedom involved in the process of shaping landscapes that come to signify belonging. He describes the gradual, solitary way that he mapped out the area as key to making it feel like his own.

The ongoing process of territoriality appears therapeutic due to the restful states that it induces.

Mohammed

I know the places where to go you know, slowly, slowly day by, especially there is um a place um behind K Hospital, it's a nice place, not too much people know about it but there is a good hill, where you can go and put a rug over there and sit down and relax you know, it's a good place.

Mohammed displays an awareness of the importance of relaxation for his wellbeing and how, through habitual explorations, he has actively shaped spaces where he can experience it. He demonstrates how participants have woven into their phenomenological maps: 'places that give space to be, (Back, 2007, p.70) In addition they have also blended their present phenomenological maps with those from their home countries. This can be seen when Mohammed discusses voluntarily gardening for his neighbours and when Ali describes being by the Thames.

Mohammed

...It makes me like very calm and it makes me like not to miss my own family, like they are my family you know where I'm living and some people, like, when they are coming from abroad or another country it take time for them to just to adjust themselves you know in this community but I I've done it, I feel good you know, I feel good inside, ...

Ali

It's very nice and if you go night time and sit there and it always remind me of back home and um... Cause when I was... four or five years old we used to live next to the river, like five minutes away, ten minutes and so I remember with my cousins we used to go... and there like at night time it is very nice, I used to go a lot because it

was very hot you know and sit next to the river, the wind, the air is very cool and fresh...

For Mohammed, the act of gardening is calming and gives him a sense of belonging in his community yet it is also a way of entwining the past to the present, of easing the dislocation from his family that seeking refuge has entailed. He suggests the therapeutic value of this interactive physical and mental process when he refers to how difficult it is for people to adjust to a new country but he has done it and feels ‘good inside’. Ali’s narrative almost merges the past with present; at points it is difficult to know which river he is referring to, particularly when he discusses how the wind and fresh air felt. This conveys how being by the river that he now lives near generates sensory experiences that carry traces of the past.

Thus, embodied encounters with their present location can lay the beginnings of a new ‘mosaic substratum’ that connects with valued parts of the old (Papadopoulos, 2005). This agency in utilising the environment to produce feelings of well-being challenges trauma discourses that both neglect context and frame refugees as ‘passive victims rather than active survivors’ (Summerfield, 2000, p.234).

Conclusion

The analysis shows that place can have a significant effect on the emotional state of young people that arrived as separated refugees and provides alternative understandings of their experiences. The findings also support the relevance of moving beyond a focus on privately located trauma to explore the relations between the body, mind, environment and societal forces (Tucker, 2010a). The locations that the participants move through are shown to be complex and coded (Back, 2007). For instance, the participants were able to shape certain

places through embodied routines into places of belonging that cut through space and time. In adopting a spatially oriented analysis we have followed social psychological research, such as Tucker's (2010a & 2010b), which emphasises the centrality of context to psychological activity. Such contextual orientations towards psychological experience are part of a broader reaffirmation of space in the social sciences. Non-representational theory, for example, posits that subjectification is formed through the world being "made up of all kinds of things brought into relation with one another by many and various spaces through a continuous and largely involuntary process of encounter" (Thrift, 2008, p.8). Theoretical implications that challenge mainstream psychological assumptions are raised by analysing the mental health of young separated refugees in relation to such spatial ontologies of being.

For example, the negative impact that regularly re-encountering restrictive bureaucratic procedures has on young refugees challenges a preoccupation in the mental health literature with past traumas that reside statically in past contexts. Instead, the importance of current locations and the need for research to consider them and the fluid encounters young refugees have with them is highlighted. Positive inter-relational experiences that are context contingent and induce feelings of belonging indicate the importance of refugee-focused mental health research moving beyond understandings that focus on individual experience.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This paper focused on six participants residing in specific areas of London, so further research is required in order to establish the extent to which the findings can be generalised to other groups in other locations. However, the findings point to the negative impact of bureaucratic procedures, particularly immigration control. Young refugees feel criminalised

by the process of reporting to the Home Office each week and often do not understand why they are being asked to report. It may help to reduce the bewildering and alienating nature of the experience if the Home Office could provide people with clearer explanations about the policies and procedures and the rationale underpinning them.

The findings also highlight the positive experiences that young separated refugees have in certain environments and the potential benefits of policies that build on and enhance them. The importance of having a safe space in the community contributed to participants experiencing feelings of peace in the UK. The psychological benefits of the community centre suggest that support systems for young refugees could be designed in ways that encompass alternative community spaces more fully. Young refugees do not necessarily require clinical interventions and those that do may find clinical environments too formal and alienating, whereas projects situated in community-based environments may feel more accessible. The opportunities for collective recovery and practical support that they can provide were also highly valued by participants in the present study. Greater integration between the community and clinical services could make it easier for young refugees who want therapeutic support to access and engage with it.

Overall, this research indicates the value of considering the spaces that young separated refugees live in and move through. It shows that the spatial analysis used in Tucker's research (2010a & 2010b) into mental health service users' everyday territories can be applied to other groups. Future research could explore issues related to nationality or ethnicity in more depth. For example, participants from countries that have been affected by war for protracted periods of time may relate very differently to places than participants who have lived in countries that have experienced long periods of stability. It would also be

worthwhile to consider the impact of immigration status on the relationships young refugees build with places.

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