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Common Ground: a space of emotional well-being for young asylum seekers



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"The smile at Common Ground is different to the smile outside. At Common Ground they don't feel sorry for him, they want to help him" (Ashur)

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Summary

This report details the findings of a pilot research project conducted at the East Area Asylum Seekers Support Group, a charity that provides support to asylum seekers in the East End of Newcastle upon Tyne, in August 2009. 'Common Ground' is the name of the charity's premises on Church Walk, Walker. The research was prompted and supported by Chris Carroll, a founder of Common Ground. The researchers conducted a focus group, interviews, and informal observation of daily activities at the Centre.

The research aims were:

1. To explore the emotional geographies of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young men in their new communities,
2. To evaluate the emotional support and enhancement of wellbeing provided by the project,
3. To consider the extent to which Common Ground operates as a space of emotional wellbeing.

The research found that:

1. Young asylum seekers are a group with acute needs as regards emotional wellbeing:
 - They had often had traumatic reasons for leaving and journeys to the UK, causing emotional instability and insecurity.
 - Their early experiences in the UK on arrival were often negative, leaving young people feeling frightened and unsupported. Inaccurate age categorisation by the Home Office causes particularly serious difficulties for this group.
 - Nonetheless, there is much evidence that some young asylum seekers develop resilience to advance their personal well-being and contribute to their local communities.
2. Common Ground works as a space which fosters emotional wellbeing, or a 'therapeutic environment':
 - As well as providing invaluable advice and facilities, Common Ground is a very important source of emotional support for the young people it serves.
 - A strong ethic of care is felt to characterise the space it provides by clients and staff.
 - Due to its philosophy of being open to all members of the community, Common Ground also functions as a 'contact zone' where informal encounters take place between newcomers and established local residents.

1 Background

1.1 Common Ground

The East Area Asylum Seekers Support Group is a charity based in Walker, Newcastle upon Tyne. Its premises, 'Common Ground', are a drop-in centre that houses a shop where clothing and household items are donated and given away to those in need; a meeting place; facilities such as internet, phone and interpretation; a hub for accessing various services; and advice provided by the staff. It was set up in 2001 as a community response to asylum seekers arriving in the area following dispersal. Little support was provided to newcomers and there had been little preparation of the local community. Its ethos has always been to welcome both newcomers and members of the existing community, partly to aid the integration and acceptance of asylum seekers, and partly because the project is located in a socially and economically deprived area of the city where British born residents also have a high level of need for services and basic resources.

In 2009 the Project Manager, Chris Carroll, approached the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action to conduct some research with unaccompanied young men seeking asylum, a significant client group of the project. The research focused on experiences of the project among this very marginalised group, who often have fundamental needs; many fall through the net of state provision of support and have nowhere else to turn. In particular the Project Manager and the researchers were interested in the emotional needs of these young people and the ways in which Common Ground might support their emotional wellbeing.

1.2 Methods

The research reported here was conducted at Common Ground during August 2009. The two researchers made a number of visits to Common Ground. A discussion group was held with 8 young men. In depth interviews were conducted with five young men and one young woman, and shorter interviews with staff members and volunteers. In addition the researchers spent time observing daily activities and interactions at Common Ground, and had informal conversations with staff, clients and visitors.

1.3 Research aims

The aims of the research were:

1. To explore the emotional geographies of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young men in their new communities,
2. To evaluate the emotional support and enhancement of wellbeing provided by the project,
3. To consider the extent to which Common Ground operates as a space of emotional wellbeing.

2 The emotional geographies of young unaccompanied asylum seekers

2.1 Defining emotional wellbeing

The wellbeing of asylum seekers and refugees in countries of arrival has become widely recognised as an urgent issue in recent years. In this context, as elsewhere in social policy, wellbeing is understood in a holistic sense, having emotional, psychological, material, social, spiritual and economic dimensions that are closely related. Our conceptualisation of wellbeing is articulated by Gough et al (2007), who identify the right every person has to a 'fully rounded humanity' beyond simply meeting subsistence needs. While a growing international literature attends to the emotional and affective experiences of migrants in everyday life (e.g. Haldrup et al 2008; McKay 2007; Noble 2008; Wise and Velayutham 2006), relatively little research has focused on the emotional wellbeing of asylum seekers' and refugees in the UK (though see Chase et al 2008 and Pain et al forthcoming). Emotional wellbeing relates closely to, though is not restricted to, mental and physical health and wellbeing. Wellbeing is 'placed' at neighbourhood, city, national and global scales; it is sensitive to particular contexts and social relations (Fleuret and Atkinson 2007; Kearns and Andrews 2009), and community projects and services for asylum seekers and refugees may have a key role in providing such spaces.

As well as meeting practical needs (e.g. for advice and material resources), some community-based projects undeniably 'work' on the basis of benefits to the emotional wellbeing of their users. For newcomers to the UK, the voluntary sector may provide 'therapeutic spaces' (Conradson 2003; Williams 2008) where they experience a degree of care and begin to feel more secure as the process of resettlement takes place. Where it occurs, this is largely an informal and incidental effect of service provision, as something that is not formally recognized or planned for. Nonetheless it can make a major difference to service users. This under-researched aspect of the positive benefits of service provision is difficult to pin down; it is about an ethos that is built through interactions, personalities, caring work and social relations in particular spaces, and as it is subjective, shifting and personal and it cannot be easily quantified. Instead, intensive qualitative methods are required to gain purchase on how this ethos is experienced and felt, and what its effects are.

2.2 Pre-flight experiences and accounts of migration

The emotional well-being of young asylum seekers is often shaped by their pre-flight experiences and accounts of migration. Previous research has highlighted that the pre-flight experiences of asylum-seeking young people are very diverse and may range from one-off political experiences of personal or familial persecution through to longer-term experiences of political turmoil or intolerance based on religious affiliation. Experiences also vary according to

whether or not a young person is accompanied by their family to the UK or if they come alone or with another sibling. Arguably, asylum-seeking young people who come with their family have an additional layer of support not available to those who seek asylum alone.

A study based in London used social services case files to show that the primary reasons behind unaccompanied minors motivations to seek asylum were the death and persecution of family members, personal persecution, forced recruitment into the army, war and trafficking (Thomas et al, 2004), with other studies identifying issues such as forced recruitment, war, rape and sexual violence (Gracey, 2003, Hopkins and Hill, 2008, Lynch and Cuninghame, 2000). Our conversations with asylum seeking young adults at Common ground found a diverse range of experiences. There were political issues behind the majority of the decisions to leave: Luke fled persecution on the grounds of his religious beliefs, Arman was smuggled in order to avoid persecution and Eric was trafficked.

Asylum-seeking young people's accounts of migration tend to focus on being accompanied to another country by an agent, being smuggled (in a lorry for example) or being trafficked. Agents are normally accessed by family members or friends (often referred to as 'uncles' by asylum seeking young people) and are paid a fee to take a person to a safe country. In many cases they accompany young people on a flight to another country where they then leave the young person to make their own way. Agents have been identified as having a major influence in deciding where asylum seekers should apply to become refugees (Robinson and Sergott, 2002). Smuggling involves someone being paid to take a person to another country illegally whereas trafficking is more abusive and may involve people being used as forced labour, slavery or sexual exploitation. In our interactions with young asylum-seekers, there were accounts of trafficking, smuggling and being accompanied by an agent. Some recalled visiting a neighbouring country before being taken on to safety.

"My family, my dad gave money to take me away. I came to Turkey and then they put me in another lorry. I don't know where I was going. I did not care. I wanted to be safe."
(Arman)

"I arrested because of my faith, my religion. They arrested me and put me in an underground and overground prison. I escaped with my friend and went to Sudan. I arranged with my agent - I met agent because of my uncle, and then I arrived in Manchester." (Abel)

2.3 Experiences of arrival and social interaction

Having fled persecution and arrived in the UK, asylum seeking young people enter an environment which is often completely unfamiliar. Many were unaware that they are in the UK and did not know where England was before arriving here. With a recent personal biography which has included fleeing persecution and arriving in a strange and unfamiliar environment, it

is not surprising that many asylum seeking young people experience periods of emotional instability and insecurity as they seek to establish a regular pattern to their everyday lives (Kohli 2007). At the same time, however, it is also important to recognize the resilience of many unaccompanied minors who have the strength of character to advance their personal well-being and contribute to their local communities despite their previous experiences.

"You don't know nothing, you don't know people, you don't know what the city is like. I was confused about everything." (Arman)

"There is no one who can help me...I am not really happy to be here. I don't have my mum, my dad. Last week, my grandmum, she died and I am not here." (Arman)

In agreement with previous research, our conversations with young people and volunteers identified three main sets of challenges faced by asylum seeking young people. First, they are faced with having to negotiate the frustrations and uncertainty of the constantly changing bureaucracy of the UK asylum system. Many young people had been waiting many years (up to 9 years in one case) on the outcome of their asylum application whilst others were confused and bewildered by outcomes that seem inaccurate and unjust. A key challenge here relates to the issue of age assessment, with some young people being labeled as adults by the Home Office despite only being 15, 16 or 17 years old.

"Everyone thought I was young in Iran, they thought I was only 13 or 14. Two or three years here now, I now look old. Too much stress and too many bad thoughts. The Home Office do not believe me ... they said, you are 18. I said, do you think you are my family, you do not know my age, I am definitely 16." (Arman)

Apart from being accused of lying by the state, such decisions also have major outcomes for the range of support and services available to young people along with the risks associated with being placed and accommodated within services provided for adults. Furthermore, the uncertainty of waiting to hear the outcome of an application increases experiences of personal insecurity and everyday anxiety.

Second, all of the young people we spoke to, both in the group discussion and individual interviews, mentioned that they experienced everyday racism and hostility in their local neighbourhoods and communities. They recollected being verbally abused in the street, physically removed from nightclubs or bars and provoked whilst travelling on public transport.

"People are racist in Newcastle. I don't like it - people here are racist. They call us names. Actually, not really, I don't feel safe." (Khalid)

"Everywhere has nice person and bad person. 30% is nice people but it happened to me lots of time that people swear at me. They call black bastard or something like that."
(Arman)

Many chose to ignore such incidents whilst also acknowledging that it had negative impacts on their sense of self-esteem and personal well-being. However, at the same time, young people in this research were keen to point out that many people and places they experienced were not hostile or racist, but that particular places (such as a bus route; a night club; a street where a gang of young people hung out) were very problematic and unsafe. Those young people who had friends in the local British born community felt safer, and there was a general perception that young female asylum seekers were less safe than young males, especially where women are temporarily housed or homeless.

The third set of challenges relates to experiences of mental health problems and social isolation. Several young people recalled feeling lonely and at times suicidal, with Common Ground sometimes providing the only safe place to talk through issues and reach resolutions. The next section expands on the importance of this support for young asylum seekers.

3 Impacts of Common Ground on the emotional well-being of clients

It can be difficult to neatly separate past, present and future...refugees perhaps more than any other group confront the challenges of the present and future in the context of a tumultuous past (Brough et al 2003, 194).

Just as young people's pre-flight experiences condition their reaction to problems and hostility they face once in the UK, both sets of experiences condition their reactions to Common Ground.

3.1 Emotional support

As noted earlier, emotional wellbeing is rarely the target of particular services for asylum seekers. At Common Ground, one programme is directly aimed at emotional health, the Emotional Support for Ethnic Minorities initiative run by the Primary Care Trust. However other services may also have benefits for emotional health. For example, describing the effect of trips to the countryside, one staff member said:

"[On the trips] they see a different England...we sometimes find that one of the young men breaks down in tears because he's so overwhelmed by the beautiful landscape and how different it is to his other experiences in this country" (Staff member)

Aside from this, the project clearly provides something in addition to a valuable hub for advice, access to facilities and a set of services. This 'something', clients and staff feel and we have observed, is an ethos of emotional support, fostered by an ethic of care and an emphasis on relational support.

The young asylum seekers we spoke to described the impacts of Common Ground in very positive terms. It is a place where unfamiliar aspects of UK life are made more familiar, and where young people always feel welcome:

"Common Ground is a nice good place. It is very good for asylum seeker who don't have support, they are not allowed to work, they have nothing to do. They come to Common Ground to collect food, get ten pounds, sometimes a ticket to North Shields*, sometimes advice, filling application forms. It's a lovely place. You can ask any asylum seeker round here, they will tell you the same." (Ashur)

(*The immigration and asylum reporting centre where asylum seekers have to report weekly, fortnightly or monthly to retain NASS support. Many have difficulties finding the Metro fare.)

"I feel really great and happy here - I feel really great." (Arman)

"When I came here, I feel very good. I meet people. The people who work here are very important as they help me and they help people." (Abel)

Most discussions around the good things about Common Ground centred on the staff. In particular, young asylum seekers felt a sense of family and community amongst the staff at Common Ground, they greatly appreciated being listened to and valued receiving advice about their personal, legal and financial situation:

"They are very very helpful - they are all very good people, they are brilliant." (Khalid)

"The people are volunteers and they work here without any benefits. They are very good." (Abel)

"When asylum seekers see somebody - anybody - smiling at them - especially the English - asylum seekers love English person to smile at them...they feel at home, and they feel safer."

Interviewer: "What about outside Common Ground, do people smile at them?"

"Well they do smile at them. But the smile at Common Ground is different to the smile outside. At Common Ground they don't feel sorry for him, they want to help him." (Ashur)

The emotional support experienced at the project is often in direct contrast to experiences elsewhere; certain other places in the neighbourhood and wider city are experienced as hostile, threatening or unfriendly, as reported in the previous section. The existence of racism and religious intolerance targeted at asylum seekers in certain places makes the space provided by Common Ground even more important to the wellbeing of many of its clients.

"It's very important for asylum seekers to be treated as nicely as they can be treated. Because other places like the Home Office don't always treat people in the same way. At North Shields, they don't smile, they don't pay any attention to the person, it makes asylum seekers feel upset." (Ashur)

All of those we interviewed talked about the fact that many asylum seekers are depressed and that some have suicidal thoughts. They therefore saw the value of Common Ground as a place where they will see a friendly face and have someone to talk to:

"I feel sometimes down and I come here and feel better." (Khalid)

"99.99% of asylum seekers have depression...so the people here make a difference. Asylum seekers most of the time are depressed, because they are poor, they come from background where they don't even have a table and a chair, they don't have technology, and if they don't have support they will get depressed." (Ashur)

"I go into Common Ground every day, it's a way of distracting myself when I have bad thoughts. [Name of staff member] or one of the others will talk to me, have a joke...Common Ground saved my life." (Eric)

3.2 Intergroup contact

The philosophy of Common Ground that everyone is welcome regardless of ethnic or religious background is important to the young asylum seekers we spoke to:

"Everyone knows everyone here. Some of them are shy, some of them are naughty, but everyone feels comfortable and relaxed here. Any person from any country in the world, any type of skin colour, any type of person, you come here and you will feel very welcome." (Ashur)

One African young man did not want to enter Common Ground when he first arrived because he could only see white and Asian faces there. After a while he went in, and he felt immediately welcomed. Eric introduced his British friends to Common Ground where they sometimes use the services too. He spoke of the interactions that have resulted, and sees these as a good thing because:

"They see that asylum seekers are not bad people and asylum seekers can see they are not bad people" (Eric).

As locally born people as well as asylum seekers use the shop and other services, drop in and have a cup of tea, this provides the opportunity for informal contact. As a staff member said, when locally born people meet asylum seekers:

"They realise that asylum seekers are real people, human beings with real stories too."

Thus while meeting the needs of asylum seekers and others for essential services and advice, and providing informal emotional support, Common Ground also has some function as a 'contact zone' where informal encounters may take place between newcomers and established local residents (see Amas and Crosland 2006; Pratt 1991).

3.3 Making family: relational support

The motif of the family is widely used by staff and clients. For example the 2008-9 Annual Report speaks of 'the family nature of the centre...it is a place of welcome, of real care and compassion...every client is treated with dignity and respect and welcomed into Common Ground'. We observed this first hand as asylum seekers entered the project.

Staff tend to know clients and their circumstances in detail, through having ongoing contact with them, and sharing with each other information about particular clients' situation or their concerns about their welfare. Client spoke of staff sometimes second guessing what their emotional state was without being told, because they know them, and providing appropriate support or just cheering them up.

"[Staff members], they help me - this is my family here - I come to see my family. I like everybody - [staff member], I like her too much. When I see her I am too happy because she helps me every time. I think she is my mum" (Arman)

Several young asylum seekers spoke of calling staff "mam" or "aunty". These members of staff provide a high level of care, often over months or years. For young asylum seekers, in the absence of their family members, these relationships provide key intergenerational connections, guidance and care.

3.4 Creating a space of emotional well-being

Staff as well as clients are very aware of the ethos that has been created at Common Ground:

"We try to create a caring, helpful atmosphere." (staff member)

"It's about support, empathy, providing moral support for everyone." (staff member)

"Common Ground is open to all...it's about a focus on the individual, acknowledging their hurt, and being able to talk about it." (staff member)

"This place is brilliant, amazing, second to none." (mental health worker)

Staff volunteer for different reasons, such as religious faith or a belief in social justice. Nonetheless they found it difficult to articulate exactly how the particular ethos of Common Ground had been created. They stressed that the ethos was talked about amongst them and with new volunteers, but that it was not 'directed' or 'forced'. It had been set in place by the founders of the project, including Chris Carroll, and volunteers who joined tended to have similar values and ways of working that complemented this ethos of care.

We observed that the ethos of emotional support is transmitted to asylum seekers themselves, some of whom go on to work as volunteers at the project, others who informally chat to, share information with and offer advice to newcomers who come into the project. Common Ground is a very friendly place and many people come to have a cup of tea, or meet friends inside or outside the building.

The net effect is that not only the people, but the space of Common Ground has become infused with this ethos: it can be viewed as a space which fosters emotional wellbeing, or a therapeutic environment (Conradson 2003; Williams 2008). Finally, it is important to highlight that the nature of the work and the level of care they provide can have a considerable emotional toll on staff themselves.

4 Recommendations

"It's amazing that it relies on so many volunteers" (visitor)

This research has demonstrated the significance of the East Area Asylum Seekers Support Group in providing a space for unaccompanied asylum seekers to improve their social and emotional well-being and contribute to their local communities. At the same time, the findings also point towards the following recommendations:

4.1 Accommodation

Although the East Area Asylum Seekers Support Group is located close to where many asylum seekers are housed, the current accommodation lacks the appropriate facilities for it to maximize its potential. We recommend that alternative accommodation is sought which includes office space (for confidential materials), private meeting rooms and other space for the clothes shop, computers and social space.

4.2 Staffing

The East Area Asylum Seekers Support Group currently employs one full-time Project Manager with the remainder of the staff being volunteers. Although volunteers are one of the key strengths of the project, we recommend that Common Ground requires three full-time staff to maximise its potential. Alongside the Project Manager, a Volunteer Manager and Finance Administrator will enable the project to develop its potential.

4.3 Extending services

Given the very valuable work taking place at the East Area Asylum Seekers Support Group, it is recommended that ways in which the services provided can be extended are examined. In particular, for financial and staffing reasons, opening hours are relatively restricted at present).

4.4 Support for staff

Ideally, future funding should include provision for support for the emotional well-being of the staff and volunteers, given the taxing nature of the work they do.

4.5 Future research needs

Issues that would benefit from future research include:

- The extent, nature and impact of racism experienced by asylum seekers.
- The emotional impacts of asylum policy on asylum seekers.

- Wider review of services addressing the emotional wellbeing of asylum seekers, as well as more detailed evaluations of particular projects.
- The value of projects like the East Area Asylum Seekers Support Group to locally born people as well as newcomers; the significance of intergroup interaction and encounter and how this relates to integration and community cohesion agendas.

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