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Making Sense?: The support of dispersed asylum seekers

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Abstract

Reforms of the system around the accommodation and support needs of asylum seekers entering the United Kingdom (UK), during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have meant that the support of asylum seekers has largely moved away from mainstream social work to be based within dedicated asylum support teams. This article investigates how the workers engaged as *asylum support workers* understand and make sense of their participation in the support of asylum seekers dispersed across the UK. By drawing upon qualitative research with asylum support workers this paper looks at how such workers make sense of their roles and how the 'support' of asylum seekers is conceived. The paper concludes that by working within this political and controversial area of work, workers are constantly finding ways to negotiate their support role within a dominant framework of control.

Key words: Asylum Seekers, Asylum support, Narrative analysis, biographical methods

Introduction

Social and housing workers, as well as other public service workers, have been involved in the care and support of asylum seekers in the United Kingdom (UK) for many years. However, the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 radically changed both the work and operation of the support provision for asylum seekers in the UK. The Act brought about the removal of asylum seekers from mainstream support provision and the creation of the National Asylum Support Service (NASS).¹ Prior to and since 1999, immigration legislation has been subject to significant and widespread reforms. As might be expected the contextual background for these reforms has been written about extensively (see Sales, 2002; 2005; Schuster, 2003; Dummett, 2001; Sales and Hek, 2004) and it is not the authors' intention to revisit these discussions in great detail. Nevertheless, it seems appropriate to say that it has been forcefully argued that these reforms have largely centred around the need to restrict an increasing number of asylum claims because of their suggested link to inflated welfare/economic costs, 'community unrest' (see for example Dummett, 2001; Schuster, 2003), and more recently their threat to domestic security. Thus, self-interest and political expedience have, in line with many European and Anglophone countries, resulted in policies of 'restrictionism' toward refugees and asylum seekers (Joly, 1996). Indeed, Sales and Hek (2004:63) claim that in the UK not only are the terms of mainstream political debate predicated on the idea that the majority of asylum seekers are 'bogus'; their increased visibility is itself an artefact of policy.

Asylum seekers are constructed as 'bad migrants'; characterised as 'burdens'

¹ This has since experienced further reforms and the agency with responsibility for supporting asylum seekers within the UK is now called UK Borders. At the time of the research the responsible agency was NASS and as such it is this that is referred to through this paper.

and 'unwanted' because of their perceived negative impact upon social cohesion and economic growth in the UK (Sales, 2002).

The NASS system brought about the removal of asylum seekers from local authority welfare support into a dedicated 'asylum seeker' welfare system. This system advocated the dispersal of asylum seekers across the UK to *regional consortia* with the local housing capacity to accommodate an allocated number of asylum seekers within local communities. These regional consortia were formed by a mix of local authorities, private landlords and refugee community organisations. Contracts were established with NASS by housing providers who delivered accommodation and housing-related support. It was the role of regional consortia to co-ordinate with the housing providers and key stakeholders in order to fulfil the accommodation and support entitlements of asylum applicants whilst their claims for asylum were processed by the Home Office. As Robinson et al (2003) has outlined these services vary but can include: the provision of accommodation and 'tenancy support' and a version of social care support which: assists asylum seekers to access public services, deals with specific incidents of harassment, intimidation and community tension, assists in arranging language support, ensures access to local schools and helps to build adult educational opportunities. Consequently while asylum policy is developed and maintained by the Home Office and NASS, the local implementation of asylum policy is largely undertaken by a handful of regional and local asylum teams. Phillips (2006) has highlighted the tensions arising for housing providers operating within a broader discourse of 'integration' and 'inclusion' whilst being required

to exclude asylum seekers until their application for asylum has been accepted.

The creation of asylum support teams has meant that the roles of workers have been fostered within a new and quite separate policy framework. Thus asylum teams and their workers, within the confines of national policy, became active agents in defining what constituted 'asylum support', their role and the approach taken to delivery. The model for what became asylum support work is largely derived from the role housing support workers occupied in the support of various vulnerable groups and the role that social workers had already played in supporting asylum seekers prior to the 1999 arrangements (see for example, Sales and Hek, 2004; Humphries, 2004; Hayes and Humphries, 2004). Indeed, in order to provide a base for service delivery, the workers that formed asylum support teams, at least initially, were drawn from a range of public service areas in particular social work but also education, housing support, etc.

Since the creation of 'asylum support teams' it has remained relatively unclear how members of such teams manage to negotiate and perform their role in light of the 1999 arrangements with only a handful of studies exploring issues arising (Okitikpi and Aymer, 2003; Dunkerley *et al*, 2005; Phillips, 2006).

Phillips (2006) has recognised the tension between national policy in this area and the practice of public sector workers and in the way workers have to attempt to reconcile contradictory elements of policy and practice. Sales and Hek (2004) discussed this type of role in the support of asylum seekers as a

dilemma between 'care' and 'control', which is by no means a 'new' dilemma for public sector support workers (Parton, 1996) and a great deal of material has been produced around ideas of 'street level bureaucracy' (Lipsky, 1980; Evans and Harris, 2004). Sales and Hek (2004) presented the 'balancing' between 'care' and 'control' that such professionals have to do as representing a 'substantial barrier to good professional practice' (p.60). Thompson (2000) supports this assertion and adds that professionals based in such roles are ill-equipped to deal with the 'complexities of being caught in the middle' (p.61). Sales and Hek (2004) report that many of the professionals interviewed in their research became uncomfortable with what was seen as the inquisitorial role required of them when dealing with asylum seekers. Such a role was perceived by these professionals as a 'gatekeeping' task rather than that of 'real' social work. By drawing upon a narrative approach to explore the work of asylum support workers this paper focuses upon how such workers make sense of and navigate their role within the constraints of asylum support; their participation within the NASS system; and their work in the support of asylum seekers dispersed across the UK.

Using narrative to explore social issues

Using the narrative metaphor to help understand the way in which people navigate their everyday lives has gained greater prominence in the social sciences over the last few decades. This is due somewhat to well-known theoretical writings from authors such as Sarbin (1986), Polkinghorne (1988), Bruner (1986; 1990) and Riessman (1993) and partly because, for social

scientists, the narrative metaphor affords both a useful method of conceptualising social understanding and a valuable technique for generating and analysing qualitative data. For the social scientist the pervasiveness of narrative provides an alternative starting point from which to understand individuals within the world; both in terms of how people make sense of and construct their lives and how they are constructed and understood by the world and others. As Murray (2003: 112) argues, ‘...narratives are not just ways of seeing the world...we actively construct the world through narratives and we also live through the stories told by others and by ourselves – they have ontological status’.

Views on narrative differ enormously depending upon how researchers position themselves within what has become known as the ‘interpretative turn’ (Hiley et al, 1991), with most epistemological positions tending to be taken somewhere on a cognitive-constructionist continuum. That is to say between those writers that see narratives as either located in the minds of individuals, such as Schank and Abelson (1977, 1995), or created in discursive practices, for example Gergen and Gergen (1988). The theoretical arguments outlining the function of narrative, its constituency and operation, have been discussed and will continue to be debated extensively as a result of differing views on epistemology (see for example Polkinghorne, 1988; Mair, 1988; Brewer, 1995). However, regardless of this a commonality remains; those working within narrative inquiry argue to a greater or lesser extent as to the sheer pervasiveness of narrative in human life.

Within policy research the 'narrative turn' has begun to provide a means for developing new and detailed understandings around the experiences of service users, including for example: children and families (Zimmerman and Dickerson, 1994); drug users (Horrocks et al, 2004); older people (Mills, 1997); homelessness (May, 2000) and perpetrators of domestic violence (Milner and Jessop, 2003). For a comprehensive review of 'narrative' in such settings see Riessman and Quinney (2005). Similarly, an analytical approach grounded in narrative techniques has been useful in attempting to understand how social workers, and related public service professionals, negotiate their professional roles when working with their clients (Hall, 1997, Hall and White, 2005). It is this latter application that this article concentrates upon. Presented is our interpretation of how a number of public service workers, in this case asylum support workers, attempt to negotiate their complex and previously non-existent roles. We look at how workers, in approaching their tasks develop meaningful ways to understand and deliver a new public service role.

Generating and analysing the narrative accounts

A total of 32 people, working in asylum support teams within one region of England, were involved in a mixture of focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The participants were mostly white British although there were two people from Asian communities and a further two people with eastern European roots. Both the semi-structured interviews and the focus groups were guided to discuss three key areas: the type, nature and delivery of support to asylum seekers; views on the role that both the support team and

the individual workers take in this support; and views on how the work of the support teams may develop in the future. Included in the final section of the interviews was an invitation to reflexively consider involvement in asylum support work.

It is recognised that interview and focus group settings may influence the way that people tell stories. Even though questions were asked that might prompt an 'answer' in a rather literal sense, participants were able to report on their experiences and interpolate their own stories in both the semi-structured and focus group interviews. Thus Mishler's (1986:69) qualified assertion that often interviewees will respond to direct questions with narrative answers, when given 'room to speak', was our experience. Similarly, as Riessman (2008) maintains, 'If extended accounts are welcomed, some participants and interviewers collaboratively develop them, but if brief answers to discrete questions are expected, participants learn to keep their answers brief' (p. 26). Indeed, when transcribing and analysing the interview data we noted that interviewees were more than likely to respond with lengthy narrative accounts. This prompted us to speculate on whether this might be an indication of the absence of a narrative precedent or 'storyboard' upon which to base their explanations. In these situations perhaps the telling of stories was a way in which to attempt to make sense of and convey their experiences; possibly sharing the previously unknown and untraversed. However, in accordance with Riessman (2008) it is also acknowledged that because the interviewer wanted to hear lengthy accounts, the appearance of narratives and stories reflects the dynamic and co-construction of these data generation events.

The analysis of these accounts was underpinned by Clandinin and Connelly's (2000:128) concept of the analyst treating the accounts produced by people as being generated within 'storied landscapes'. Here instead of trying to follow a set procedure there is the realisation that there is no 'one' way of analysing texts within 'narrative inquiry'. Rather, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) assert that the process of moving from field texts (interview transcripts) to research texts is a complex and dynamic procedure. They argue for transcripts to be searched and 're-searched' for certain features such as 'patterns, narrative threads, tensions and themes...' (p.133). They go on to assert that researchers must undergo prolonged engagement with such texts during which researchers begin to 'narratively code' these texts and explore 'places where actions and events occurred, story lines that interweave and interconnect, gaps or silences that become apparent, tensions that emerge and continuities and discontinuities that appear' (p.131). The interpretation that we offer of these accounts acknowledges the complexity involved in reading a text and the inevitable partiality of the analytical process where other interpretations may be possible (Czarniawska, 2004).

Analysis and discussion

Exploring the 'nature' of asylum support work

In every interview with workers the accounts of what their roles entailed and the 'nature' of asylum support work were very diverse. However, it became

clear that there was a distinct 'official line' around the work of the asylum support team being narrated. Generally, this 'official line' related to the description of the work that these teams do in terms of providing a service to asylum seekers on behalf of the Home Office and NASS.

'The role of the, well, as I understand it, the role of the asylum team is to provide support on behalf of the Home Office and the Consortium to the asylum seekers that are dispersed here.' **(Mary)**

'I think it needs to be clear that we're working to a contract with the Home Office, through the Consortium and there's a very specific role to provide accommodation and a level of support for the asylum seekers dispersed to us. That's our core duty.' **(Robert)**

Such an 'official line' remains close to the spirit of the agreement with NASS and very close to the governmental rationale for the creation of asylum support teams. However, as Carol commented in her account such a description of the role of the team was in some way only a 'version' of events, *'Yeah I can do that I can give you the official version and then I can give you the real version.'* What was clear was that most support workers recognised the need to provide accommodation and related support but once these requirements had been met, an array of other issues were seen as important in their support work. For example, Susan in particular draws upon the NASS contract as *'fundamentally'* governing *'all that we do'* but then continues to list a number of structures and procedures that they implement and *'do on top of*

that not required of us in a strict or not sense by NASS'. For instance, when first describing the role of the team Claire narrates a continuously caring role,

'I see it more of like a befriending role that's like a main priority because they come into our area and they know nothing about it and it's our job to befriend them and get the trust.' **(Claire)**

Asylum support as fusion

When left to talk in more depth about what is seen as the role of the asylum team many of the support service workers began to narrate a role that had many different components 'fused' under the operationalisation of one support role as both Paul and Claire described,

'I mean obviously part of the role is to be an accommodation provider with a NASS contract we've got...that's really the prime role I mean that's our raison d'être and on top of that we have this role about being a lead agency as well so anything to do with asylum seekers usually comes through here, from a local point of view people wanting to find out more about asylum seekers and what they can do.' **(Paul)**

'It's like a big mixture of things that that we do and there's a lot of things we don't have to do but we do anyway, and it's all to do with empowering the individuals to do it themselves.' **(Claire)**

One worker in particular saw that the role was a combination of 'other roles' and also seemed to offer an understanding of the work of the Asylum Support Team as being interpretive depending upon which department you worked within.

'Okay the role of the asylum team when you say it like that it sounds so crystal clear doesn't it? At the moment the asylum team is under Housing so it means something completely different to them. It means something completely different to Social Services which is the other directorate that we originally came from and then moved over into housing it means some thing completely different to all the groups that I go and talk to.' **(James)**

Although many of the workers did not explicitly say that their role had multiple components and pressures, they did go on to explain what they saw as the role of the teams by drawing upon an often exhaustive list of activities and duties. During many of the interviews and focus groups the NASS aspect of the work of an asylum support team was often seen as the 'smallest' and even 'easiest' side of their work. In one discussion about what people perceived as the role of the asylum support teams Ruth described the multiple and often unexpected nature of her work,

'I think the NASS aspect of it I think, personally for me, is the smaller part of it because it's there's only basic things the rest of them because your dealing with people and, it's difficult to explain. I think it's the

things that we have to do that fulfil NASS's contract are very small in relation to everything else that we do so I think that's the easier side of it...But there's also there's a lot of grey areas like you say in dealing with people...especially for us everybody just calls us.' (Ruth)

Within this Ruth describes their work within the asylum system as some kind of a 'buck-stops here service'. Here the work stretches to include providing advice, support and knowledge to both those working elsewhere, who have questions about asylum seekers, and also the asylum seekers themselves who contact them for assistance on a wide range of issues. Similarly, in one focus group Sam and Vicky enter into an exchange about Sam's position and experience with a client she was still supporting,

Sam *'Yeah I mean recently I've had two couples who have had marriage difficulties and I'm not trained in marriage counselling but I've been put in that role and y'know and you just feel like you're there and you're listening to all sorts of things y'know it could be that this couple are having a marriage breakdown or one of them could have mental health problems so within the clients you could be dealing with marriage difficulties and a whole number of things and as a support worker you may not have that particular background to deal with it and we don't really have that sort of training either to deal with it even at a basic level'*

Vicky: *'Are there points of referral are there places where you can refer people?'*

Sam: *'Well we can but everything is really over stretched and I know the waiting lists are huge I think through looking that the only place whose waiting list isn't that huge is through the church'*

Similarly, David describes a situation where they 'have' to become more involved on a range of issues due to what he perceives as a degree of inaction from mainstream services,

'I think sometimes you have to get more and more involved if other agencies aren't really kicking in y'know. For example, like racial harassment it just seems really difficult to get y'know like housing officers almost to actually take up I mean they take it seriously but they don't seem to be following up things quite as much and you have to keep going back.'

As a result, a large amount of the work of asylum support teams includes catering for the diverse needs of their clients, as 'mainstream' services are seen as ill-resourced to provide support and services to these individuals. This perhaps supports the notion in a number of the accounts that the asylum support teams are somehow 'distinctive' or as Paul describes '*on their own*' in the local authority. Sales and Hek (2004) similarly found that the pre-1999 social work teams were also 'marginalised' within the local authority where they worked which actively prevented the development of good practice and joint working with other professionals.

For the most part, when describing the role that they take in their work, most of the focus that is placed upon working with asylum seekers by the support service workers becomes more than just the provision of accommodation. Rather, such work seems to be drawn towards various tasks relating to social care support and work that is intended to integrate and 'bridge' communities. For example, in one focus group Barry emphasised the important role that such efforts as 'support' and 'integration' play in his work with asylum seekers. Barry talked about trying to make people feel '*comfortable*' and trying to provide people with '*some sort of quality of life*'. Because of the isolation that Barry sees asylum seekers as experiencing a number of attempts have been made in his local authority focusing on promoting inclusion in particular the use of sport in order to '*...get rid of isolation and so, well it's just to make 'em as comfortable as possible while they wait for a decision to stay or go.*' This perhaps illustrates the strategies used by workers 'on the ground' in order to navigate through what Phillips (2006) sees as the exclusion of asylum seekers from 'integration' within the surrounding area and community.

However, there are descriptions, particularly occurring in the accounts provided by support delivery staff, of a certain amount of frustration in not being able to deliver as comprehensive a 'support' service as they would like to provide.

'I think most of us would prefer to do support work and support the clients properly but we've never really been allowed to do that because there's always been time restraints there's always been huge numbers

everything's got to be done really fast so we can only ever deal with the emergencies and crises of the clients and so the kind of real support work is left.' **(Sam)**

Just as the authoritative asylum support system was seen as 'controlling' these instances of 'fire-fighting' seemed to pose real problems and obstacles to performing '*real support work*' for the workers. As Barry says,

'I don't know, it's just er, our team is so small compared to a lot of others that, we 'aven't 'ad chance to settle down and, into a working pattern because we're firefighting all the time and we're going from crisis to crisis.' **(Barry)**

When Sam elaborates on what she meant by 'real' support work she goes on to say,

'Well, you know if you just want to, you know, be a friendly face and be able to help with smaller things like getting somebody a pram, which is actually quite a big thing for that family who might not be able to because somebody else hasn't got any money you know. So we tend to do you know, sort of, emergency support rather than going in at the bottom and doing all kinds of other support.'

During these accounts the 'official line' narrated by the workers described the work in which the asylum support teams were involved as revolving around

the provision and deployment of NASS support to asylum seekers dispersed to their areas. What became clear from the analysis of this 'official line' is that although the NASS contract was seen to '*fundamentally govern*' all that the asylum teams do, the 'official line' became a 'flexible' baseline allowing workers to build upon the 'support' they provide allowing them to progress towards performing '*real support work*'. From here, rather than the NASS contract dictating the precise work required by those contracted to implement it NASS support can be seen as a starting point from where 'other' multiple support strategies could be implemented. The nature of these support strategies depended largely upon the perceived needs of the asylum seekers but also upon the role that the asylum support teams took in their geographical areas in relation to other public services.

Asylum support as a quest

One of the prevailing findings from this research was that the workers, irrespective of their role (i.e. strategic or service delivery), narrated a sense of sharedness about their work. This is not suggesting individuals told the same 'official narrative' (Gabriel, 2004) rather, a sense of collective coherence was transmitted. Thus, the analysis revealed that a dominant narrative was identifiable that appeared to provide a framework with regard to the purpose, role and direction of the participants' work. The identification of this narrative suggests that asylum support workers made sense of their work by drawing upon a 'quest' or a 'heroic' narrative.

It became clear from the accounts of the support service workers that encapsulating the nature of asylum support was difficult. Individuals would often begin by drawing parallels with their previous experience and then build into this, new and varied roles and duties based upon legislative and policy obligations. As a result the accounts of support service workers were replete with narratives that tried to convey to the listener the ways in which they attempted to negotiate some of the contradictions and tensions in their work with asylum seekers. During this narration it was noted that the support service workers appeared to strive to present to the listener 'morally adequate accounts' (Cuff, 1980) that attempted to justify their working practices, actions and omissions. The analysis showed that much of the interviews were taken up with accounts of their negotiations between apparent contradictions in policy (for example, 'care' and 'control'). Often they told how they found it difficult to etch out 'good practice' using their existing professional and personal skills in a job that is arguably a hybrid of social work, housing management and 'something else'.

These accounts were of course diverse in their content and performance however, during the interviews and focus groups, a particular way of providing an account of their work became identifiable. It became possible to see a common narrative thread running through a number of the accounts that appeared to draw parallels with the 'quest' metaphor. The identification of the quest metaphor has previously been applied in research into other areas, for example; health and illness (Frank, 1995) and organisational storytelling (Barry and Elmes, 1997).

The use of the quest metaphor can be seen to offer workers a means whereby they are able to begin to make sense of this previously unknown area of practice. In his work, Campbell (1949) explains how throughout time we can identify this as a common archetypal pattern of human experience. Hence he believed that the quest, often referred to as a 'Monomyth', is incredibly pervasive and able to be detected in all cultures and throughout history. This monomyth is otherwise known as the 'Hero's Journey' conveying the personal striving and resolute nature of the quest. It is this striving endeavour that that appears most relevant being evident in the emergent analysis that follows.

Asylum support and 'the road of trials'

Campbell (1949) described the narration of a hero's journey on the quest as 'the road of trials' where the hero faces various sufferings and challenges which have to be endured in order to progress through the stages of the quest. Similarly, Frank (1995: 118) discusses various trials or 'initiations' that are embodied in the various physical, emotional and social sufferings in the experience of illness. In the accounts of the support service workers there is repeated reference to metaphorical trials where 'barriers' need to be overcome, and 'battles' and 'conflicts' with 'adversaries' are embarked upon, as they take on the quest of delivering support services for asylum seekers. For example, Carol one of the asylum team managers, narrates 'barriers' when describing the work of her team,

Carol: *'... we find ways through and round and over and under barriers that we come across to make those things happen and to make those services work so that we can support people in the way that's best for them really.'*

There are multiple and simultaneous characterisations of particular adversaries in the accounts including the media and at times even the 'community'. Therefore while acknowledging the multilateral nature of the identified 'foe' in these accounts; the analysis shows that this role often appeared to be assigned to the Home Office and more specifically was evident in the way that NASS was narrated.

Paul: *'...people are dispersed to us without any choice they're just sent up and we've got to support them I'd like that if people had a choice...'*

James: *'...it smacks very much of policy made on the hoof...what it will do is it will create a whole group of people who've got ... the government don't know where they are and disappear into the woodwork that that's not good it's kind of acting macho but not really thinking it through.'*

The mechanisms of the NASS system are narrated as being almost omnipotent; having little consideration regarding the effects that their decisions have on others, specifically the asylum seekers themselves and the

local authority asylum teams. In these examples, and throughout the data, both NASS and the Home Office are narrated as almost antagonistic to the work of the asylum team; being characterised as oppositional, unjust and uncaring. In the following account another of the support service managers tells of how she made a stand against NASS - the undeniable adversary,

Claire: *'We've we had early experiences where NASS were not very sympathetic to the placement of asylum seekers and they were telling us which houses to put people in they sent a Sikh Afghan family to live in the middle of a predominantly white area where there's known BNP activity. They're not a violent political party but you can imagine the sort of people that might follow that political party...there were problems with young kids and racial harassment so this family were targeted. Despite me raising concerns with NASS to say this family shouldn't be placed here, we need really an Eastern European family, they didn't accept that and they just said they will not have a no go area. This family lasted in that property two nights and the windows were put through...I relocated them I got into trouble for that by NASS "you do not move people without our permission" I said "I am sorry but I am here, the brick that came through the window nearly hit their four year old son I am not leaving them in the property with boarded up windows terrified about what's going on outside"...I still refuse to put people back in that property.'*

Claire in her account assumes the identity of 'hero protector'; rescuing the powerless asylum seekers she supports. Claire goes on and tells of how she was 'adamant to fight this battle' and re-tells how she won one of her battles over housing allocation with NASS.

Claire: *'NASS told me after all the arguments I put forward NASS told me "you will get those properties repaired and put them back". So I said "no I won't" and they argued with me and I said "right I'm withdrawing them from the contract" "oh oh" I said "yes that's how serious it is"*

These narratives aim to show how committed the workers are, and the efforts they will make, as they endeavour to deliver support. Also, related to the 'road of trials' metaphor, throughout the interviews the support service workers narrated a number of issues as 'challenges', rather than barriers or antagonists to their work. Interestingly the challenges that occur in the support service workers accounts tended to be derived from the response of the community towards asylum seekers. Paul suggests a number of ways in which he responds to the challenges in his work,

Paul: *'Having seen the response of people to asylum seekers I don't feel very happy I wouldn't want to live here cause I think it's very small minded and conservative. Now that's a challenge we have to move people on and I think it's kind of moving on slowly and I think the*

current environment doesn't help at all with the terrorism and the War (conflict in Iraq)...'

Paul: *'...now the mould's been broken and having African people here, people from the Middle East and all that so it's kind of changing and that's good so it's a challenge for [the local area].'*

Interestingly, here meeting the challenge is not about battling with the foe, rather the emphasis is on 'moving on'; bringing about change via a more active public engagement approach. Robert's quote below does convey more evidence of the 'road of trials' but he makes reference to 'winning over'; the tenor of his narration is one of endurance and respectful engagement,

Robert: *'Well it's to do with the whole issues of asylum obviously erm it's really just to take the brickbats that people throw at you ... you know we've had some rough meetings on, on that people have been quite challenging erm but anyone that wants to learn more about why people are here I think it's just that hearts and minds thing is important to, to win over.'*

With regard to the quest metaphor and the 'road of trials', while there is clear evidence of antagonism in relation to the Home Office and NASS, it is the weaving of community related challenges that is narrated as posing the most anticipated challenge in the day to day work of the asylum team. The community is narrated as being resistant to asylum seekers because of

perceived 'small mindedness'. Therefore, the dispersal of different ethnic minorities presents a 'barrier' not only to the asylum support workers but also to the local area. Temple et al's (2005) work demonstrates the importance of establishing local networks and building trust across communities. Yet, the subtle differentiation, between on the one hand the Home Office and NASS as antagonists and on the other the community as a 'challenge' to be won over, does demonstrate the complexity of such work.

Asylum support and the 'heroic' protector

As has become evident the quest narrative has within it heroes, adversaries and those in need of saving. Earlier we made reference to narratives having 'ontological status' (Murray, 2003) where they impact upon the lives we are able to live. By entering the role of the 'hero' or leader in the 'quest' narrative the asylum support worker places the asylum seeker within a particular role. They become people that need to be fought for, sheltered and supported and are thus dependent upon the asylum support teams and the services they deliver. When asked about this aspect of the work Jennifer clearly feels passionately about the need to protect, whereas Paul appears to make efforts to acknowledge the inherent dangers in such a designated role,

Jennifer: *'I do and I think other team members do as well, I don't know to what extent but, have a kind of passionate belief in the fact that people do need protecting, that they have human rights'*

Paul: *'I think they are a very vulnerable group of people and there's a temptation to create dependency by them on us so one has to be aware of that'*

The nature of Government policy, whereby those seeking asylum are unable to work legally, does create dependency and indeed has been found to reinforce prejudice (see Temple et al, 2005). Hence in one of the focus group discussions around the role of service delivery it was apparent that the nature of asylum support services did nurture dependency. Yet, of relevance here is how this dependency is narrated in a way that is suggestive of dutiful protector with Elliot explaining that 'you are their person'.

Elliot *'They know what we are there to do but, you know, they form a special bond with you, don't they, and, and you are their person, you know, the person that books them into the reception centre becomes their contact person and you find out everything about them. They tell you everything. Nobody else would spend that amount or quality time with them'*

A number of service delivery workers explicitly acknowledged that although it may be beyond the NASS remit they are able, even encouraged, to 'go over and above' more normative expectations. Interestingly, although narrated as responding to need, delivery is seemingly premised upon a level of service user appreciation.

Kat: *Like us, there are lots of people who go over and above what is actually expected if they see it's needed. It's about equal opportunities and it's about helping somebody and if they need something that maybe isn't a part of your remit but you can do it and they appreciate it then you do it.*

Int: *What's the line taken by the local authority on this?*

Kat: *It's encouraged.*

Cheryl: *Yes it is by our team as well.*

This notion of being the 'protector' is one which Schuster (2002) identifies as among the earliest roles adopted by states offering asylum. This role of 'protector' present in past dominant cultural narratives of asylum in Britain and seemingly permeates the shared narratives within the asylum team. Again contradictions arise when considered in light of the way that asylum is currently storied within Britain. British international politics prides itself on projecting a story which is anchored in fairness, generosity and protection (Cohen, 1994) yet domestic political discourse abounds with the rhetoric of restriction, control, and exclusion (Sales, 2002; Robinson *et al*, 2003). Therefore, protection and support is seemingly delivered within a relatively hostile environment. With workers narrating trials and barriers on many fronts it is perhaps to be expected that such work is experienced, and can be conceptualised, as a 'quest'.

Asylum support work as personal enlightenment

The last aspect of the quest narrative that we wish to draw upon relates to the way in which at the end of the quest (the quest in this sense has not yet ended) workers are able to reflect upon their experiences when providing support to asylum seekers. Campbell (1949) posits that once the journey has been completed there is a certain amount of insight gained by the teller or hero from their actions during the quest. In closing the interviews one of the main questions posed, in order for people to generate stories of their time working with asylum seekers, concentrated on exploring with the workers why they worked as asylum support workers. Here people started to talk about *'this job being the best job they have ever had'*, or fundamentally changing them as people. For instance, Barry talked about an experience that he had with a family he was working with which he described as a *'nightmare'* where the team put *'hours and hours'* of work trying to meet their needs. However, once they had received a positive decision on their claim Barry talks about the dramatic change that he experienced in the demeanour of the family. Evident in his account is profound satisfaction in a job well done,

Barry: *'I walked out the door and he's walking up the street, the guy, with a, with another Afghan friend, " Mr Barry you wait there", completely changed, 'e's bright-eyes, bushy tails, walking up," You stop there", so I 'ad to go back and dally with 'em and then they came and I 'ad ter go and buy 'im a camera 'cos 'e wanted a photograph of all the*

team and tears and, and they sent us a Christmas card this Christmas from, from Mr S, I can't, brilliant this the buzz you get 'cos you've got this couple that are a little quiet and the only way they could sort of like get your attention were complaining ... shouting, shoutin' down t'street, you wait there till I come and, absolute brilliant feeling. It's best job I've ever done'.

Similarly, Jennifer talks passionately about championing the 'cause' and how rewarding she finds the work,

Jennifer: *'So I just feel that I'm a champion of the cause lately for whatever reason I do, but I right enjoy it, I love it.'*

Mal also talks about how he thinks that working with asylum seekers and supporting people during their asylum claim has changed him in fundamental ways,

Mal: *'I think, I think it's changed me as a person I'm more tolerant and, and I'm more grateful and thankful for what little bit I 'ave got'*

Debbie talked about the entire experience of working with asylum seekers was a continuous learning event,

Debbie: *"I'm learning more about the world everyday, d'you know what I mean, I'm learning everyday about, you know, different cultures, different ways, it's addictive in a way. It's like travelling without moving"*

Paul talks about the way in which he has been surprised by the gratitude that his support team has been shown by those that they were or had been supporting. This is seen as a powerful '*pick me up*' giving workers the '*strength to go on*'.

Paul: *'...at Christmas time we get cards from people expressing erm you know phrases like we love you (laughs) now you wouldn't get that in normal services'.*

During one lengthy account conveyed in one of the focus groups, Cynthia spoke of continuous 'battles' and enormous 'obstacles' that had to be overcome in her work. The focus group facilitator directly asked why she continued working in the field thus generating the response, '*Cos it's different to any, any part of social work that I've ever done*'. This difference, for Cynthia (as well as a number of other participants in the focus group who expressed agreement) meant that they were able to take part in experiences that seemed outside a 'regular' social work role,

Cynthia: *"There's so many experiences like being a birthing partner, a boxing coach and an English teacher which is just wonderful".*

Finally, Mary explains how the asylum team has transcended its role as an agent of the Home Office subsequently believing that the team has become closer to its clients,

Mary: 'They don't see us as kind of a Home Office team or you know like an asylum team, they see us as just workers trying to do their best for them and I think for me, it's almost like them embracing us as a team and accepting and sort of saying you're our friends. Through all the horrible things we have had to do and all the legislation bits and the fact that sometimes they get their vouchers stopped, they still make the effort at new year or at their celebrations to include us'

Boje (2000) speaks of the hero of the quest meeting chaos head on, seeking to overcome the trials which present on the way. However there is evidence of more than this in these accounts – there a sense that the heroes (asylum support workers) have themselves been transformed in that their values and understandings have been changed. Furthermore, what is striking from the reflective accounts generated as part of this research is the main role that is characterised for the asylum seekers in the data. It would be interesting to explore the asylum seekers' 'version'/narration of their interaction with the support service workers. How do the asylum seekers experience the aspects of the quest we have identified; being the protected, shared marginalisation and transformation at a more personal level?

Conclusion

Hayes and Humphries (2004) claim that attitudes to, and practice with, asylum seekers hold up a mirror reflecting back professional practice. They explicitly refer to Masters' (2003) view that the professional value base and practice of social work has been compromised by resource-led thinking and prejudices influenced by the wider political agenda. Hayes and Humphries also highlight the difficult relationship between 'mainstream' (housing/social work) services and these more specialised and, arguably, unique asylum teams. Our analysis seems to reveal a value base rooted in marginalisation. Yet, while not wanting to minimise the impact of such marginalisation the practice of asylum support workers presented in this paper appears to be underpinned not only by a supportive ethos but it has also taken on a more heroic motif. Evidence of the mobilisation of the symbolic quest may indeed be a demonstrable effect linked to marginalisation from mainstream social services. Nevertheless, seemingly being at 'oneness' with the quest, a position that may not have been available if integrated into mainstream services, appears to have facilitated levels of commitment and endeavour that may not have been available within the more normative narrative template. This observation is not intending to suggest that mainstream teams are less committed rather that the narrative resources available to see and construct the world are different. Faced with dominant cultural narratives of undesirability, dangerousness and undeserving, for this group of service users, it can hardly be surprising that asylum support workers find narrative alternatives which more readily reflect their day to day experience. Hayes and Humphries (2004) make reference to 'good practice' and, in particular,

social work's history, of rising to the challenge to support the marginalised and oppressed.

Phillips (2006) discussed how the entire NASS support system is fraught with complexity and stands as a contradiction to attempts to 'integrate', 'include' and ensure that the most vulnerable are safeguarded. However, the accounts of the workers here indicate that many asylum support workers not only recognise this but refuse to be blindly compliant. In certain small yet significant ways multiple attempts are made to ensure asylum seekers experience some form of inclusion and integration whilst they await a decision on their asylum claim. This is clearly not altruistic, as workers derive a significant amount of personal fulfilment out of their work, but the actions remain effective. This was undoubtedly the case and there is a need to explore if and how UK Borders are managing these issues since the introduction of the 'New Asylum Model'. This analysis might suggest that while there are clearly issues to address, in terms of the processes within how support is delivered and wider discursive practices within the asylum support system, asylum support workers are continually finding ways to mobilise an ethically astute value base.

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