

# Contesting identities in exile: An exploration of collective self-understanding and solidarity in Refugee Community Organisations in Glasgow

Teresa Piacentini (University of Glasgow)

## **Introduction: living under asylum**

The experiences of asylum seeker and refugee communities in the country of asylum raise a number of important social and philosophical questions about society, community and identity.<sup>1</sup> Displaced by the processes of forced migration and socially dislocated by immigration and asylum policy, people seeking asylum have to pick through shattered pasts and uncertain presents in order to construct new realities, and some form of future context for their existence. Distanced from their certainties of 'back home', they are faced with a number of challenges of 'home-making' in their country of asylum.

On first analysis, it may be difficult to perceive any obvious connections between fragmented, displaced communities and the concepts of social engagement and empowerment. The problem of exploring such connections would seem further exacerbated by

---

<sup>1</sup> An in-depth exploration of 'community' will not be possible here (see for example Anderson 1983; Baumann 1996; Cohen 1985). For this discussion, 'community' denotes a group of people holding attributes in common (immigration status, asylum claims) interacting with each other through a variety of relationships. The idea of community as a collective indicates ideas of belonging (to the common fate of asylum) and of a particular social phenomenon (seeking asylum). Social relationships are diverse and interactions are not always equal or indeed positive, but it is in the negotiation of relationships that communities become complex places.

restrictive, non-integrative policies that contribute to the social segregation of asylum seekers and their social construction as a distinct and separate social category. Such policies are further problematised by their implementation, specifically in the length of time asylum applications take to process; in the UK this may take anything up to seven years. It is within the boundaries of this liminal space of 'neither here nor there' that the 'asylum seeker identity' comes to be constructed, and the parameters of the relationship with the 'host' community come to be set, namely, one of complete dependency, where codes of behaviour are defined by the State, creating the public image of the passive, deferential asylum seeker.

Yet, whilst awaiting a final decision, people exist and live in communities, children attend school, adults engage in further education and volunteering, asylum seeker associations emerge, relationships are forged. So despite the transformative processes they experience as they await a decision on their asylum claim, individuals continue to exist as social agents. Of key interest here is the way in which structures constrain their experiences and, due to the limitations placed on their human agency, regulate their levels of self-determination (Bloch 2000). However, asylum seekers respond to these restrictions upon their agency in different ways. By placing the social at the forefront of the analysis and drawing it into the lived experience of asylum, sociological inquiry can focus on the social settlement of asylum seekers, and on how social structures and asylum seeker networks and associations develop in exile. Critical to this discussion is that such associations are set up in terms defined by asylum seekers themselves. This self-determination as a community organisation then provides, it is argued, a platform to reintroduce the agency of asylum seekers in redefining some of the conditions of

their existence, thus reshaping their identity in exile. From having been transformed through categorisation processes as something 'less' (Schuster 2003), through the collective, the asylum seeker becomes something 'else', and indeed something 'more'. This requires new concepts for understanding these phenomena in a non-essentialising way.

### **Theoretical understandings of migration: defining the migrant**

In order to begin exploring these questions further, it is instructive at this point to briefly locate this discussion within the broader literature on migration and categorisation processes. Theoretical understandings of migration centre on key sociological questions of who gets to move, under what conditions entry and exit take place, and the processes of settlement and adoption in receiving countries.<sup>2</sup> For some, the migrant professional élite, this movement is relatively unproblematic, they are welcomed in most places for the skills they bring and the economic contribution they can make. For others, the welcome is reluctantly extended, but extended nonetheless. Most often, this is in response to capitalist demands and labour shortages, and on the condition that 'they' don't stay. For others still, the door is pretty much closed, and remains so, thus creating a market in desperation as individuals turn to human traffickers to try to get through the legal barriers in place that restrict entry (Back 2003; Kundnani 2001). Within this hierarchy of migrants, asylum seekers tend to occupy this last category.

Where the literature refers specifically to 'refugees', it is most often in relation to people with a determined legal status, and as an

---

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion on the extent and nature of international population movements, please see Massey *et al* 1998; Castles and Miller 2003.

add-on to the analysis of migration generally. Once status has been granted, refugees tend to be merged statistically with voluntary migrants (largely economic migrants), and become absorbed in the scholarship as a generic group.<sup>3</sup> However, notably lacking from these analyses is the plight of the asylum seeker as we come to understand this today. The category ‘asylum seeker’ is used to identify an individual who has claimed asylum in accordance with the UN 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the status of refugees and who is still awaiting the outcome of this claim. ‘Refugee’, on the other hand, refers to individuals whose application for asylum has been successful. Malkki (1995) points to the essentialising practice common in ‘refugee studies’ that tends to proceed as if all refugees share a common condition or nature. This highlights the need for conceptual clarification in distinguishing between the refugee and the asylum seeker. Defining the asylum seeker is important for a number of reasons. Claiming asylum means establishing a formal relationship with the State, in which identity needs to be reformulated in order to fit with legal definitions (Ordóñez 2008). The role of State is crucial to categorisation processes and community formation, as admission and incorporation policies not only shape who gets in, but also the quality of life post-migration. However, when State apparatus enforces policies that monitor, control, and curb respective forms of migration, this creates a hierarchy of immigrant desirability. Subsequently, different categories accord different sets of rights to migrants, meaning that different migrants have different freedoms, which brings us to a fundamental perspective in this paper, that *how individuals experience life in exile is dependent on their migration status*.

---

<sup>3</sup> Bloch 2000; Faist 2000; Kunz 1973, 1981; Malkki 1995.

When the question of asylum seekers specifically is addressed, this tends to be framed under the general theme of social exclusion. As a starting point, considerations of exclusion and marginalisation enable us to problematise the ‘incorporation regimes’ that asylum seekers are subject to in the UK.<sup>4</sup> This points to a marginalised existence defined by policies which curtail movement and consumption once ‘in country’, as well as levels of self-determination. Nevertheless, as fieldwork suggests, there is more to how asylum seekers survive this state of exclusion, and of interest here are the ways in which they themselves might subvert this framing as passive recipients of State welfare. These are the questions this paper will begin to address.

### **Categorisation and identification processes**

Identifying our selves or others is a matter of meaning, and meaning always involves interaction (Jenkins 2004, p.4). However, as interaction is fluid and dynamic, so are the processes of identification, and of being and becoming (Hall 1996; Brubaker & Cooper 2000). Similarity and difference are central to this relational model of identity and the identification processes of categorisation and group definition (Jenkins 2004): ‘we’ can only identify ‘them’ in relation to ‘us’, a minority can only be identified as such in relation to a majority, ‘they’ can only be identified as asylum seekers in relation to ‘citizens’, and so on. Jenkins posits a way to understand identity, individual and collective, as the dialectical interplay of processes of external ascription and internal self-definition (2004, p.23). From this perspective, the centrality of power and politics to these processes of

---

<sup>4</sup> Please see Bloch & Schuster 2005; Craig & Lovel 2005; Griffiths *et al.* 2005; Levitas 2005; Malloch & Stanley 2005; Ratcliffe 2004; Temple & Moran 2005; Zetter *et al.* 2006.

categorisation and group definition becomes increasingly salient, and allows a shift in emphasis to the agents doing the identifying. This highlights the codifying nature of categorisation as developed by powerful and authoritative institutions: the State as identifier has the material and symbolic resources to impose categories (Brubaker & Cooper 2000).

This relational process of ‘Othering’ draws from repertoires of identification and may be framed around gender, ‘race’, ethnicity, class, status, sexuality or immigration status. In the case of asylum seekers, their lack of defined immigration status makes them subject to structural processes of social segregation that result in Othering. They then come to be framed as a special category of people with special problems requiring special solutions and systems. This is manifested firstly in the conditions of temporary stay which involve dispersal and housing on a no-choice basis.<sup>5</sup> Mobility is also closely monitored and restricted via mechanisms of regular reporting and home visits from asylum support service caseworkers. Paid employment is prohibited and a separate welfare support system is in place that restricts consumption levels and participation in social life. Critically, these policies and practices would be considered wholly unacceptable if applied to ‘our own’, and yet they are legitimised as rational and proportionate responses to coping with the ‘burden’ of undesirable migration. Consequently, this homogenises and silences the asylum seeker, and redefines him/her in terms that come to

---

<sup>5</sup> The Home Office’s dispersal programme (introduced in 1999) was originally intended to relieve pressure on councils in Dover and London with high numbers of asylum seekers. Designed as a short-term, non-integrative planning tool for handling asylum applications, rather than allowing individuals to stay in geographical areas with some established co-national representation, the rationale was that the processing of claims will not take long enough for the need to tap into existing social ties to be really meaningful (Schuster 2003; Temple & Moran 2005; Zetter *et al.* 2006 ).

reinforce common-sense understandings of their special status, subsequently justifying their marginalisation. This intervention on that group's social world then alters that world and the experience of living in it (Jenkins 1994), reflecting the power of others to shape social lives via classificatory systems of differentiation. As such, the categorisation of asylum seekers is decidedly disabling.

To fully understand the significance of this Othering, it must be embedded in the global changes of recent decades of which mass migration is one symptom. As Bauman (2000) suggests, the uncertainty heralded by globalisation has led to the need to blame someone for the fragmentation, dislocation and insecurity of late modernity. All too often, this blame is directed at the all-too-tangible enemy: the stranger next door (Bauman 2000, p.8). The current climate of securitisation has increased the visibility and presence of certain individuals, notably the asylum seeker, whose ascribed identity is increasingly blurred: asylum seeker, economic migrant, illegal immigrant, terrorist. The asylum seeker represents a challenge to the myth of the nation state, with its impenetrable borders, national sovereignty, and fixed notions of identity and belonging. Indeed, the sentiment of nationalism may be understood as a counter-modern response to the ontological insecurity brought on by the onslaught of globalisation (Back 2003). Through migration, the state is 'endangered' by migrants who 'penetrate' its borders. The undecided status of asylum seekers and their concomitant ambivalence means that ethical responsibilities towards people in need come to be further eclipsed by this perceived threat that 'they' now pose to 'our' sense of identity and nationhood. From this perspective of similarity and difference, and how this shapes notions of identity and belonging, the stateless and status-less asylum seeker

comes to be viewed as an aberration and an abnormality, drifting but not belonging (Malkki 1995). Thus asylum seekers are considered a threat to the natural and national order of things, their identity becomes one of the unwelcomed, unsolicited, undesirable 'pariah' (Arendt 1978). This emphasis on their 'out of placeness' pathologises the asylum seeker and questions the moral bearings of displaced persons, feeding into discourses of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' of state benevolence and the welfare bounty (Sales 2002). Once reconstructed in this way, the moral case becomes about protecting 'our' interests and needs over 'theirs' (Kushner 2003).

### **The significance of the collective and emerging consciousness**

The social dislocation of forced flight and forced dispersal which disrupts, distorts and subverts any possible forms of social ties means that asylum seekers are, by definition, fragmented. Questions must then be asked of the kind of social ties that *can* flourish within a context of low receptivity and high hostility, where asylum seekers are negatively viewed and discriminated against. Dispersal makes it difficult to tap into traditional social connections of family, friends and support networks (Bloch 2000), and their lack of immigration status means that the social, cultural and economic positioning of this group sets them apart from other vulnerable groups. They have to develop new ties of kinship and work harder to access the usual channels of support open to the more 'mainstream' vulnerable groups. In the absence of traditional forms of migrant networks, social networks adapt to meet the restrictions in place and take on new forms (Collyer 2005; Zetter & Pearl 2000). New refugee

associations and social networks in the country of asylum draw on individual and collective resources in order to reassert social identities in exile. Group-identified identities emerge that are enabling.

To explore how this emerges, Arendt's writing on the consciousness of stateless people is of relevance (Arendt 1978). The flight into exile results in a loss of identity, whereby the refugee as the ultimate stateless person comes to be defined by their facelessness, not their humanity (Arendt 1978). However, although the asylum seeker occupies what might be better defined as a liminal space, Arendt is useful in considering how loss of agency can be helped by a political reaction, whereby the refugee as pariah becomes a social actor who is conscious of her state and acts consciously. In Arendt's analysis, the conscious actors are the subjects inclined to bring about action (Arendt 1978; Heuer 2007). This idea is developed further in the literature on ethnic and diasporic consciousness.<sup>6</sup> Ethnic consciousness commonly emerges in situations where groups sharing common attributes and interests organize to influence the exercise of state power or to defend their shared interests. In this analysis, consciousness is an emergent property of particular sorts of social relations, and is formed around an understanding of the social distance that separates the minority from the dominant majority (Banton 1997; Portes 1984; Castles & Davidson 2000). It becomes the foundation for an emergent solidarity bound by the limits of that particular community (Portes 2000). This emergent 'we-ness' also offers potential for exploring how migrant networks, and in this case asylum seeker networks, come into existence. Central to diasporic consciousness is a readiness to engage in building connections that can readily constitute an 'imagined home' around which displaced

---

<sup>6</sup> Clifford 1994; Banton 1997; Portes 2000.

groups can self-mobilise their awareness as a diasporic group (Wahlbeck 2002; Vertovec 1999; Brun 2001) Diasporic consciousness is marked by dual or multiple identifications and the awareness of multiple localities that stimulates the desire to connect with others both 'here and there' who share the same routes and roots.

This provides an interesting starting point for exploring the processes of social transformation, engagement and, ultimately, empowerment that might be located in the emergence of an *asylum consciousness*. Presented through the data, it will be suggested that this consciousness develops from the need to bolster the ontological insecurity that forced migration processes bring about at an individual and collective level. This insecurity is reinforced through structural processes that sustain a limbo-like existence for asylum seekers. However, it is the collective self-understanding of this existence that develops into a *bounded solidarity*, itself the source of collective solidary action, embodied in the form of Refugee Community Organisations. Refugee Community Organisations are independently set up and run by asylum seekers and refugees for asylum seekers and refugees. They provide a wide range of information and support services, as well as a cultural and social space for members to come together in the country of asylum. They tend to organise around nationality, regional identity or gender, are run by volunteers of the association, and generally have rather limited access to resources, meaning they often self-fund activities. This paper will highlight some of the ways in which *asylum consciousness* is operationalised through the Refugee Community Organisation (hereafter RCO), and how, through a self-determined collective

engagement, this becomes a process for transforming identity, through appropriation of the asylum identity for action.

## **Methodology**

Adopting an ethnographic approach to the research, the data presented here is drawn from seven extended unstructured interviews, one group interview (nine participants), and from extensive observation at meetings and events, conducted from 2007 onwards with participants from six different RCOs in Glasgow. The various RCOs in the sample have been in place since 2003, although some are more recently constituted, and represent asylum seekers and some refugees from a number of African countries including Congo Brazzaville, Congo DRC, Ivory Coast and Cameroon. Two RCOs have a pan-African membership. Membership varies from twenty to over a hundred. Respondents were contacted directly through the author's professional networks and contacts. Interviews were conducted in French, with one in English, and no interpreter was required as the author speaks fluent French. They all took place in the Glasgow area, Glasgow being the only Home Office dispersal site in Scotland. Respondents are numbered to preserve anonymity. French-speaking African RCOs are of particular interest to this exploration of social survival in exile for a number of reasons. The lack of shared common language, and of traditional colonial links with the UK, means that anticipated 'settlement capabilities' of francophone Africans may be initially inhibited through communication barriers and missing historical ties (Bloch 2000; Zetter & Pearl 2000). However, the racial hierarchy that is conditioned by the processes of historical capitalism means that as 'Africans', and because of the low standing of their country of origin

in the international division of labour (Grosfoguel 2004), they come to be framed as former colonised people anyway, laying bare the racial bases to migrant incorporation regimes.

### **‘Non-settlement’ and its impact on self-determination**

The experience of living under asylum reveals something quite specific that sets this apart from other migratory contexts. Rather than speak of ‘settlement’ and adaptation, what we see emerging instead is a daily lived experience of ‘*non-settlement*’ that is defined by a number of elements. The prolonged processing times of asylum claims contribute to the stigmatisation of people as they endure a drawn out exclusion from economic and social participation. In their day-to-day existence, asylum seekers have to negotiate the very real possibilities of detention and deportation and the anxiety this brings. The processes of no-choice dispersal and housing make it difficult to make roots and tap into existing social networks, and the dependence on a separate welfare system not only limits consumption, but also, through support provided in voucher form, brings immigration status directly into the public domain. From the data, a picture begins to unfold about how these manifestations of *non-settlement* impact on ‘settlement’ and adaptation at a cognitive, affective and operational level.

*‘Its like life without living, you exist, every day, but you don’t live, not like before [...] this is not a life, this is not living. We live in limbo [...] they have forgotten us.’ (Respondent 1)*

*‘You don’t know, what will happen next? For some months okay, but five years? I don’t know [...] we are all sick, asylum makes you sick, it ages you, how much longer?’ (Respondent 4)*

*'It's the uncertainty, every morning you wake up, but to what? Every day, not knowing if it will be your turn, if the brown envelope is the one. The day ends, you try to sleep, you worry if tomorrow it will be the same, and it is, every day, this routine of uncertainty, of not knowing.'* (Respondent 3)

*'All the time, they say you are a single person, they forget I have a family back home, I am a mother, but here I am nothing [...] how can I settle here without my children? How can I settle when I can't work, make a living, be independent? Now I worry my children have forgotten me, it's been so long since they saw me [...] I have nothing am nothing [...]'* (Respondent 2)

*'Maybe it would be different, if we could work, contribute. I can't even pay my bus fare, so I stay in my flat, sometimes all week, on my own.'* (Respondent 1)

Reconceptualising living under asylum as an experience of *non-settlement*, as opposed to the more benevolent and unproblematised notion of 'settlement' favoured by policy rhetoric, raises important sociological questions about how individuals exist between the certainties of life before migration as a citizen of one nation, and the uncertainties of life after migration as an asylum seeker. A key question that emerged very early in the data collection was: what sense of identity can develop from this lived experience, where social, economic and cultural participation in the country of asylum is highly restricted, and the duration is undetermined?

### **An asylum consciousness?**

As a tentative hypothesis, an *asylum consciousness* may be conceptualised that is framed around an awareness of the social distance that separates asylum seekers from 'the rest'. Of importance here is that this awareness becomes a decisive factor affecting behaviours and dispositions (Portes 1984). *Asylum consciousness* may

be defined as follows: a collective self-understanding of the lived experience of seeking asylum, to exist as an asylum seeker that is bounded by the knowledge of a shared fate in the country of asylum and characterised by a social, economic, political and cultural distance that separates people seeking asylum from the dominant majority. More simply put: a shared understanding of what it feels like to be an asylum seeker and to exist socially as an asylum seeker.

*‘Only an asylum [seeker] knows what it is like. You just need to look at her face, I know what she is going through, I know because I live this every day, look around this table, asylum ages you. I used to be a beautiful woman, look at me, my hair is white, my skin [...]look at me, look around at everyone.’ (Group Interview)*

*‘ I am strong because others are not so strong, they need to be encouraged [...] but we are all broken by this asylum.’ (Respondent 3)*

*‘I can tell you his story, look at his eyes, we have lived the same thing, we have left our families, we live in limbo, this is what brings us together. Look around the table, everyone from different countries, but asylum has brought us together we are not alone.’ (Group Interview)*

*‘You only need to say Section four, we all understand [...] God have mercy on us all [...]’ (Respondent 1)*

*‘You are labelled asylum [...] you have to fight, you have to stick together, you have to teach others, No, you can do this, you can go to college, no-one else will tell you [...]’ (Respondent 4)*

Again, early into data collection, this powerful, almost palpable sense of shared suffering is marked by a number of characteristics. Unique to asylum and refugee migration is that elements of force have acted as a stimulus to leave ‘home’, but then a symbolic violence is continued via classificatory systems of differentiation which facilitate

the processes of structural and social Othering. State apparatus and restrictive policy measures segregate asylum seekers from other migrants, thus designating the former as a distinct and distant social group. The connections asylum seekers have to home might be sustained through practices of cultural reproduction, but inherent to the re-imagined home are the complex tensions of a 'home' and life before asylum that is often violent and traumatic. This data suggests what may be analytically described as a collective self-understanding based on a commonality, the sharing of a common attribute, of claiming asylum; a connectedness, the relational ties that link people, again through asylum; and thirdly a groupness, the sense of belonging to a distinctive bounded solidary group (Brubaker & Cooper 2000).

Paradoxically, the UK government's deterrence policies of dispersal and restricted movement have, by their exclusionary pressures, in fact brought people together in the collective experience of their marginalisation. Because of long processing times, the social networks the government sought to subvert have nevertheless developed because individuals have needed to turn to others 'like them' for different kinds of support. This is a key point, as it suggests that the structural forces which challenge the legitimacy of the presence of asylum seekers have, in fact, resulted in the development of collective consciousness that becomes enabling and empowering. The nature of this support will be explored in the next section.

It is suggested here that this process of shift in identification from categorised group to self-defined group, from being an asylum seeker to becoming a collective, marks the beginnings of a reconsideration of the fixed 'asylum seeker identity'. Rather, *asylum*

*consciousness* relates to the lived identity, as something that is fluid and evolving, but nonetheless framed within a static and unchanging legal framework. However, it is the internalised fluid identity that becomes the foundation for the development of social networks and social relations with others who understand the negotiation of identity that occurs in the space between the internal group identification identity and the external categorisation. *Asylum consciousness* then raises questions of multiple identities, as well as multiple identification processes, both self and imposed, that might initially be shaped by structural processes, but which go on to be appropriated and self-determined by individuals and the collective.

### **Spaces of solidarity and mobilisation**

Conceptualising life under asylum in this way marks, I suggest, a moment of social transformation: the development of a *bounded solidarity* that is embodied in the emergence of a transformative collective, the RCO. Bound by the limits of the community, this solidarity is the emergent product of a common fate, and produces a set of dispositions particular to this community that develop into resources that can be appropriated by others in the community. The existence of an *asylum consciousness* is a decisive factor in the willingness of individuals to exchange knowledges and favours, share and build resources, and most crucially provides the building blocks for the development of identities that are self-determined and ultimately empowering.

Because the social networks which can often facilitate voluntary migration are rarely in place for refugees, asylum seeker social networks need to adapt and take on new forms (Collyer 2005; Zetter & Pearl 2000; Zetter *et al.* 2004).

*'We can help others. You know when I came there was no information, no advice, now I can help others because I know what they experience, I know how difficult it is, how you never leave your house for months, and how you think of what you left behind every minute of every day. This is what we can do in our organisation for others in the same situation.'* (Respondent 5)

Traditionally providing an integrative function, the work and direction of RCOs have been transformed in line with increasingly restrictive policy. Since dispersal, RCOs now perform a more defensive role in response to withdrawal of state support and the threat of detention and deportation, to the extent that RCOs fill the chasm left by State withdrawal of welfare (Griffiths *et al.* 2005; Temple & Moran 2005; Zetter *et al.* 2006, 2005):

*'We all put by a little money, to help our members who are destitute. We cannot see our sisters go without food, without a bed.'* (Respondent 2)

*'In the beginning, we were about providing social support to women in our community, on practical things like where to get shopping, public transport, practical things. And we still do this. But we now do more, we provide advice, language support, guidance through the legal system, supporting our members at appointments with lawyers, help with reading letters. When women are dispersed here, we make sure their lawyer, the Home Office, everyone is up-to-date with the new address, help them find a lawyer in Glasgow [...] Some of our members are destitute, we try to help with support, somewhere to sleep.'* (Respondent 3)

*'We have a system for our members on vouchers [asylum seekers considered appeals rights exhausted receive Section four support that is voucher-based rather than cash], we exchange our money for their vouchers. But even this is difficult because you need to live near the supermarket to use the vouchers.'* (Respondent 7)

This suggests an inclusion that is negotiated via bottom-up practices, that is, inclusion into associations becomes the currency by which people seeking asylum become social actors and create their own agency. The RCO becomes a site of resistance to the ascribed dependent asylum seeker identity and potentially plays a crucial role in the transformation of social identity in exile:

*'We have a duty towards our brothers and sisters, to help them, to show them their rights, to give them information, not just on where to go for things, but how things are done here in Glasgow, how to live in Glasgow, how to bring up your children in Glasgow, this is our job.'* (Respondent 5)

*'You know, helping each other is the African way, that is how we do things back home and how we do things here.'* (Respondent 7)

*'We are a life line for our members. I don't want any woman to go through what I went through. We are like a springboard for our members, to rebuild their lives, integrate into the community and for our children too.'* (Respondent 2)

*'We don't want to become a generation on benefits, this is why we need to support our members with information, advice, training opportunities, when they get their papers they are ready to work, they are skilled up and ready.'* (Group Interview)

Whilst awaiting a decision on their asylum claim, individuals exist in a limbo-like state, with very little validation of their existence. Nonetheless, the short, medium and long-term needs for each other legitimise them socially, and it might be argued that this solidarity becomes the basis for their development into collectives. These preliminary findings suggest that building social connections enables asylum seekers and refugees to replenish the social self in a manner that is both transformative and potent:

*'It is important to organise events, to show who we are, where we come from, how we keep our culture and our traditions alive. So we want to show others what we can do.'* (Respondent 2)

*'Our idea is to develop a social enterprise for our members, so they can work in it, and develop their skills. For too long they have been waiting. Now we will develop a business by members for members, for our community and Glasgow, and it will be about what we need as well as what we can do.'* (Respondent 3)

*'We have a micro credit system in place for our members. You know we couldn't open bank accounts as asylum seekers, so our members pay a small amount every month, and then we give out loans at a very low interest. It's the only way if you need money to buy something and can't get a loan. You know, this is what we do back home.'* (Group Interview)

Subsequently, through this (re)building of social resources, a strong sense of inter-community solidarity emerges from the shared experience of dislocation, dehumanisation and destitution that propels and compels individuals to come together. This may build on the kinship and solidary ties of 'being with people like me', as well as 'reaching out to people like me'. For the asylum seeker, daily life is routinised by conditions of stay in the UK and this routinisation is an example of how self-determination is constrained. The RCO, however, offers a space to contest and resist such routinisation, to subvert exclusionary practices and introduce different practices that are self-determined: collective expressions of cultural belonging, celebration and recognition of national identity, as opposed to the asylum seeker identity, alternative financial and emotional support that empowers and makes members accountable to each other. As such, the social identity comes to be transformed through collective experiences.

The social implications and practical applications of this solidarity can be identified by the following characteristics. Firstly, RCOs perform a dual role: traditionally integrative, they have been forced to adopt an increasingly defensive role due to governmental policy that is hostile and restrictive. Secondly, they provide new forms of kinship to replace those lost through the processes of forced flight and dispersal policy. These new forms of kinship can prove to be equally strong and also influential. Thirdly, they provide a social and cultural space to reclaim the collective identity, that is, they can reclaim the group identity based on gender or nationality or ethnicity, as opposed to being based on asylum status alone. They provide members with an opportunity to live the culture of 'back there' over here. This is also identified in the literature on minority associations and raises important questions about the conditions under which certain groups maintain a semblance of their 'ethnic' identity. Fourthly, as the process of living under asylum is socially isolating, RCOs are an opportunity to rebuild social identity in exile, to reassert identity, and to replenish the social self. These organisations provide a coping mechanism and survival strategy. Indeed, their members explicitly describe them as a way of surviving midway-to-nowhere. As a fifth point, RCOs illustrate ways in which groups self-define positively in racial terms, and the transformation of negative racialised categorisations into positive group-defined identities. Finally they provide a significant campaigning and community activism platform for members. Often such organisations will mobilise around asylum issues: detention, deportation, destitution, awareness raising campaigns, lobbying the Scottish Government, mobilising in demonstrations supported by other NGOs and charities, as well as other asylum seeker organisations,

through the frequent use of direct and indirect action. The micro-credit and social enterprise examples are powerful and important illustrations of RCOs actively subverting structural processes to challenge the reproduction of poverty and negative hegemonic images of asylum seekers.

These actions nourish the culture of solidarity that emerges from engaging in collective action. The symbolic boundary that categorises asylum seekers is then turned into a resource. The development of an *asylum consciousness* as a basis of collective self-understanding may provide an important sense of continuity in exile. This brings us back to questions of identity, the processes by which social actors recognise themselves, and are recognised by other actors as part of broader groupings, and the development of individual and collective identity in exile. The multiple dimensions of these organisations demonstrate that they are indeed an appropriate lens through which we can understand the different ways in which stateless, rootless people exist socially and develop social relations against a backdrop of uncertainty.

### **Final comments**

This paper has presented some findings and considerations that have formed a conceptual framework for exploring the very specific and distinct experiences of people seeking asylum and their social survival in exile. The conceptual framework suggested provides an alternative model for exploring the specific experiences of people seeking asylum: the deconstructing of 'settlement' as a space of *non-settlement*, the shared understanding of their common fate that develops as an *asylum consciousness*; the transformation of this understanding into a *solidarity* bound by the limits of their communities that impels and

propels individuals to act as a collective. Conceptually this may be considered a useful framework for exploring the nature and quality of social structures of the African Refugee Community Organisations studied here. Through this lens, we can surmise that this experience of collectivisation and mobilisation is indeed socially empowering and transformative. The data presented in this paper clearly exposes some of the cognitive, affective and operational dimensions to asylum consciousness and bounded solidarity: from the experience of *non-settlement*, characterised by degradation, dehumanisation and marginalisation, a culture and consciousness of great vitality emerges. Through a self-determined social engagement, the familiar can be relocated in the unfamiliar.

Whilst the concept of *asylum consciousness* may be analytically interesting and bear potential fruit in rethinking the asylum experience, there must be caution in developing this hypothesis in a non-essentialising way. The groupness experienced cannot be assumed, nor can the boundaries and boundedness of groups be taken as unproblematic. Critical discussion on the backdrop of structural inequality against which this collective consciousness may be developing must be integrated into this analysis, and this has to recognise the multilayered and varied nature of the experiences of the asylum seeker as s/he comes to terms with the new social realities of life in exile. Finally, it should be noted that the generalisation of these concepts to other community organisations is a matter for empirical discovery, and points to future directions for sociological inquiry. My focus is to avoid obscuring the agency of the people involved – asylum seekers and refugees – and the hard work and long struggles that are taking place over identification, as well as the uncertain outcomes of such struggles. Of key note here is the degree

to which asylum seekers contribute through conscious efforts to the making of their history, to becoming something ‘more’.

## **Bibliography**

Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined communities*. London: Verso.

Arendt, Hannah. 1978. *The Jew as pariah: Jewish identity and politics in the modern age*. Ed. Ron H. Feldman. New York: Grove Press.

Back, Les. 2003. Falling from the sky. *Patterns of Prejudice* 37(3). 341-353.

Banton, Michael. 1997. *Racial consciousness*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.

Baumann, Gerhardt. 1996. *Contesting cultures: Discourses of identity in multi-ethnic London*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bauman, Zygmunt. 2000. *Globalization: The human consequences*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Bloch, Alice. 2000. Refugee settlement in Britain: the impact of policy on participation. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration studies* 26(1). 75-88.

- Bloch, Alice & Liza Schuster. 2005. At the extremes of exclusion: Deportation, detention and dispersal. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28(3). 491-512.
- Brubaker, William Rogers & Frederick Cooper. 2000. Beyond “identity”. *Theory and Society* 29(1). 1-47.
- Brun, Cathrine. 2001. Reterritorializing the relationship between people and place in refugee studies. *Geografiska Annaler B* 83(1). 15-25.
- Castles, Stephen & Alastair Davidson. 2000. *Citizenship and migration: Globalization and the politics of belonging*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Castles, Stephen. and Mark Miller. 2003. *The age of migration* 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan
- Clifford, James. 1994. Diasporas. *Cultural Anthropology* 9(3). 302-338.
- Cohen, Anthony, P. 1985. *The symbolic construction of community*. Chichester: Ellis Horwood.
- Collyer, Michael. 2005. When do social networks fail to explain migration? Accounting for the movement of Algerian asylum-seekers to the UK. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31(4). 699-718.

- Craig, Gary & Hermione Lovel. 2005. Community development with refugees: Towards a framework for action. *Community Development Journal* 40(2). 131-136.
- Faist, Thomas. 2000. *The volume and dynamics of international migration and transnational spaces*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Griffiths, David, Nando Sigona & Roger Zetter. 2005. Integration and dispersal in the UK. *Forced Migration Review*. 23. 27-28.
- Grosfoguel, Ramon. 2004. Race and ethnicity or racialized ethnicities? Identities within global coloniality. *Ethnicities* 4(3). 315-336.
- Hall, Stuart. 1996. Who needs identity? In Stuart Hall & Paul du Gay (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity*. 1-17. London: Sage Publications.
- Heuer, Wolfgang. 2007. Europe and its refugees: Arendt on the politicization of minorities. *Social Research* 74(4). 1159-1172.
- Jenkins, Richard. 1994. Rethinking ethnicity: identity, categorization and power. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 17(2). 197-223.
- Jenkins, Richard. 2004. *Social identity*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. London: Routledge.
- Kundnani, Arun. 2001. In a foreign land: The new popular racism. *Race & Class* 43(2). 41-60.

- Kunz, Egon F. 1973. The refugee in flight: Kinetic models and forms of displacement. *International Migration Review* (2). 125-46.
- Kunz, Egon F. 1981. Exile and resettlement: refugee theory. *International Migration Review* 15(1). 42-51.
- Kushner, Tony. 2003. Meaning nothing but good: Ethics, history and asylum-seeker phobia in Britain. *Patterns of Prejudice* 37(3). 257-276.
- Levitas, Ruth. 2005. *The inclusive society? Social exclusion and New Labour*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Malkki, Liisa. 1995. Refugees and exile: From “refugee studies” to the national order of things. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24. 495-523.
- Malloch, Margaret. S. & Elizabeth Stanley. 2005. The detention of asylum seekers in the UK: Representing risk, managing the dangerous. *Punishment & Society* 7(1). 53-71.
- Massey, Douglas. S., Joaquín Arango, Graeme Hugo, Ali Kouaouci, Adela Pellegrino & J. Edward Taylor. 1998. *Worlds in motion: Understanding international migration at the end of the millennium*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Ordóñez, Thomas J. 2008. The state of confusion: Reflections on Central American asylum seekers in the Bay Area. *Ethnography* 9(35). 35-60.
- Portes, Alejandro. 1984. The rise of ethnicity: Determinants of ethnic perceptions among Cuban exiles in Miami. *American Sociological Review* 49(3). 383-397.
- Portes, Alejandro. 2000. The two meanings of social capital. *Sociological Forum* 15(1). 1-12.
- Ratcliffe, Peter. 2004. *'Race', ethnicity and difference – Imagining an inclusive society*. Maidenhead: Open University Press/McGraw Hill.
- Sales, Rosemary. 2002. The deserving and the undeserving? Refugees, asylum seekers and welfare in Britain. *Critical Social Policy* 22(3). 456 – 478.
- Schuster, Liza. 2003. Common sense or racism? The treatment of asylum-seekers in Europe. *Patterns of Prejudice* 37(3). 233 – 256.
- Temple, Bogusia & Rhett Moran. 2005. *Learning to live together. Developing communities with dispersed refugee people seeking asylum*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Vertovec, Steven. 1999. Conceiving and researching transnationalism. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22(2). 447-462.

Wahlbeck, Östen. 2002. The concept of diaspora as an analytical tool in the study of refugee communities. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28(2). 221-238.

Zetter, Roger & Martyn Pearl. 2000. The minority within the minority: Refugee community based organisations in the UK and the impact of restrictionism. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 26(4). 675-698.

Zetter, Roger, David Griffiths & Nando Sigona. 2004. *Refugee community based organisations in the UK: A social capital analysis*. Oxford: Oxford Brooks University.  
<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/planning/dfm> (7 February 2008).

Zetter, Roger, David Griffiths & Nando Sigona. 2005. Social capital or social exclusion? The impact of asylum seeker dispersal on UK RCOs. *Community Development Journal* 40(2). 169-181.

Zetter, Roger, David Griffiths, Nando Sigona, Don Flynn, Tauhid Pasha & Rhian Beynon. 2006. *Immigration, social cohesion and social capital. What are the links?* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.