Utopian community football? Sport, hope and belongingness in the lives of refugees and asylum seekers

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Author(s)
Stone, C

Aims

This research paper examines the idea of belonging amongst asylum seekers and refugees and considers the role of community-based support in social development and the construction of hope

Methodology

This paper is based on a three-year research programme exploring the role of football in the lives of refugees and asylum

seekers in the UK.

This research was conducted by a community sport engagement organisation based in South Yorkshire. It used an ethnographic approach, alongside semi-structured group and individual interviews with more than 50 refugees and asylum seekers living in South Yorkshire. Most of the research was conducted in the City of Sheffield.

In order to ‘decentre’ sport in the research, research was conducted over three years through regular at events and activities aimed at refugees and asylum seekers. Research participants were recruited through this ‘grounded approach’ whereby they were connected with either the community sport engagement organisation already, or through links to wider organisations that work with refugees and asylum seekers.

Participants were all male, aged between 18 and 52 (the majority in their 20s), had lived in the UK for between 3 months and 10 years, and were either asylum seekers, refugees, or former refugees who now had British citizenships. However, this particular paper focuses on those still classified as asylum seekers.

The research was also influenced by participatory action research, and as such, part of the research included establishing a weekly recreational football session targeted at asylum seekers of all abilities. This session is what forms the focus of the paper.

Key issues

The paper gives context to the position of refugees and asylum seekers in current socio-political discourse and way in which the category of ‘asylum seeker’ has been constructed as an unworthy character. It also considers the steps taken by national government in the late 2000s to increase the welcome and integration of new migrants, and the recommendations made in 2009 by the Department of Communities and Local Government that sport was a possible source of social integration.

Stone also outlines the problematics of the term ‘integration’ when considering asylum seekers, as the legislative barriers they experience to work and economic participation mean they are unable to fulfil certain conditions connected to successful integration. In order to navigate this and other problematics associated with terminology, Stone uses the term ‘belonging’ to understand self-conscious identity construction.

‘Belonging’ is understood by Stone to be elusive in that there is no clear definition, but the term is still keenly used by academics and writers. He draws the differences between legitimated belonging at the level of the nation states and citizenships, and personal feelings of belonging that arise through local activities taken in their day to day lives. Stone focuses on the latter in this paper, and the way in which local activities can facilitate a sense of belonging, particularly in the case of the football sessions initiated by the community sport engagement organisation in South Yorkshire. He defines belonging as an ideal towards which

each and every one of us proceeds, where there is an interconnection of personal identity, group attachment and cultural background.

Stone reports that a sense of belonging was able to be forged in the football session due to a combination of factors, such as a welcoming environment, organisational support, organic group development, democratic decision making within the group, a focus on playing football for the sake of it, and an implicit knowledge that others in the group are facing similar problems. However, the latter was found to not be discussed amongst the group of asylum seekers, rather football took precedence.

Stone sees this as an opportunity for asylum seekers to have short-lived instances where they are in control of the game, rather than being subject to a wider system over which they have no power. Additionally, the football sessions were seen as a way for people to grow in confidence, build relationships, offer meaningful opportunities, raising awareness, educating others, and providing a gateway for participants to further engagement

Conclusion

Summarising, feelings of belonging were seen to be enhanced through the structured approach of the organization, voluntary levels of participation and the mutual understanding of all those involved. The regularity of the sessions also contributed to the sense of belonging and hope for the future, providing some structure to the everyday lives of participants.

He encourages practitioners not to see sport as the silver bullet through which positive integration can be achieved, rather it can “add to cultural, social and mental welfare making it easier to feel more welcome, access other services and channel frustration in a more constructive manner” (179).

For asylum seekers, due to the precarity of their legal status in the UK, any sense of belonging will be experienced through momentary connections made at the local level. The research finds that football provides a number of ways for these momentary connections to be experienced. However, a more resilient sense of belongingness relies on the ability to unite these moments into a more consistent narrative of experience. In the words of Stone, “the role of community sport is in balancing the utopian compensatory desire for a different life with the possibility of shaping the realities of everyday lives to be closer to that which is hoped for.”

Web Link
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02614367.2017.1329336?journalCod
Migrant Group
Asylum seekers
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Community and society
Community cohesion
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Contact Name
Chris Stone
Email
cgstone@hotmail.com

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