Interrogating community: dispersed refugees in Leeds

YHRMP ID
90
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Aims

The thesis addresses conceptualisations and manifestations of community among people who have claimed asylum in the UK and examines the influences of policy on these social processes. It aims to contribute some everyday perspectives from individuals often marginalised in research and public debate.

Methodology

A 14 month ethnography in 2003-2004 employing participant observation with people from 12 countries, focusing on 14 men and women and extending to a further participant field of 40 asylum seekers, refugees, refugee community organisation leaders and members and community development workers.

Key issues

Conditions in the country of origin and UK policies create insecurity that shapes social life and affect the way that 'community' is experienced. Policy infiltrates daily life through housing control mechanisms, shaping capacity for home-making. Secrecy is a vital tool in managing social life in conditions of precariousness. Refugee community organisations, parties and social events form around new social groupings that include some and exclude others. Music, dancing, dress and food create some familiarity but do not simply represent 'home' culture. They create moments and places to contest both continuity and adaptation to the UK. The central importance of food highlights the particular role of women in reproducing community.

Conclusions

Ephemeral forms of 'community' allow for a sense of shared values in the context of fluidity. Recently-arrived refugees do not live in a community, but engage with [or avoid] community moments.

Migrant Group
Asylum seekers
Topic
Community and society

Community cohesion
Dispersal
Refugee community organisations
Place
Leeds
West Yorkshire
Year
2007
Resource Type
Thesis
Publisher
University of Hull
Published Location
Hull