

Giving space: care, generosity and belonging in a UK asylum drop-in centre

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Aims

This paper examines the political negotiations which underpin the performance of charitable spaces. The paper draws upon a period of ethnographic research at a United Kingdom drop-in centre for asylum seekers to consider how notions of charity, generosity and the right to give are structured within the daily accomplishment of an environment of care. The research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

Methodology

A 10 month ethnographic research project was conducted during 2006-7 in Sheffield. Participants included a number of people connected to two centres providing services for refugees and asylum seekers. Data was collected via a research diary and interviews with one of the centre's founders, 4 volunteers, and 12 asylum seekers.

Key issues

The interactions and relations in the drop-in centre produce a space associated with ideas of welcome and generosity. Practices of care and generosity relied upon, and actively reinscribed, normalised visions of charity, belonging and citizenship.

Conclusions

The relations of the drop-in centre may reproduce a politically passive and marginalised vision of the asylum seeker within the UK. This reading of an environment of care for those seeking sanctuary has implications for how we understand the spatial experience of asylum itself, and for how we might envision more politically attentive and ethically responsive spaces of sanctuary.

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