

Community moments: integration and transnationalism at 'refugee' parties and events

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Aims

The article examines events and parties in relation to understandings of integration and community among people who were dispersed to Leeds, United Kingdom under the asylum support system. It is based on doctoral research that aimed to investigate 'community' among refugees and asylum seekers following compulsory dispersal, beyond a sole focus on formal refugee community organisations.

Methodology

The ethnographic research [participant observation] took place across a 14 month period during 2003-4 in Leeds. There were 14 key participants [originating from 11 different countries; 7 refugees and 7 refused asylum seekers] and 40 more participants including refugees and people working for refugee services. The ages of the key participants ranged from 17 to late-thirties and their children from babies to teenagers. Field notes recorded research interactions, sometimes augmented with written interviews and visual mapping of social relationships. Access was initially facilitated by volunteering in two different roles for refugee projects that led to extended relationships with participants. Relationships with individuals were built up in visits to their houses and engaging in daily activities, and subsequently with their associates and through taking part in activities of refugee community organisations, other refugee supporting agencies, and in attending music events and parties.

Key issues

Parties create 'community moments' through a sense of unity around central, familiar cultural symbols. These 'community' events include some and deter others.

Conclusions

Parties do not simplistically reproduce either 'home' or 'UK' cultural forms and should not be strictly categorised as relating to 'there' or 'here'. Such nuanced approaches to identity and settlement contrast with the common construction of ethnic groups in policy and discourse as cohesive and different. Parties and music events contain elements both of homely familiarity and strange novelty. Their ambiguous nature provides a contested domain of new community formation, integration, and adaptation.

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