

Separation and the Sense of Self for Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Cathy Aymer and Toyin Okitikpi

The experiences of refugees and asylum seekers continue to provoke discussions both in the media and in society at large. Although the media report the difficulties and problems with which people are confronted as they attempt to gain entrance into Britain, the subtext of these reports of course goes much deeper and wider than it first appears. At the heart of the discussion about refugees and asylum seekers is the fear about numbers, class, race (in the wider sense), eligibility, concerns about difference and the question of integration.

While these ideas form the subtext of the discussions, for many refugees and asylum seekers their daily living and long-term needs are more immediate. At a practical level there are health problems, housing, educational, loss of contact with their families, financial and language problems. At the same time, there are underlying psychological problems and emotional difficulties that stem from social problems associated with cultural dislocation and adjustment, and grave uncertainties about the future.

In this conference presentation, we explored the concept of separation as it impacts on asylum seekers and refugees and considered how the experience of dislocation impacts on their sense of self as they attempt to make a new home in their adopted lands. We also considered what it means for asylum seekers who, in order to gain a sympathetic hearing, have to repeat many times a story that might be untrue but allows them to appear 'wretched' enough for them to gain entry. However, once this identity has been built it has to be reinforced, embellished upon and maintained when dealing with officialdom. This is likely to have a devastating effect on the sense of self as the newcomer attempts to build a new life.

Above all, our presentation addressed the ways in which asylum seekers and refugees attempt to reconnect with their communities in this society and at the same time try to maintain the links with their countries of origin.

© copyright 2003

