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Participation and wellbeing in urban greenspace: 'curating sociability' for refugees and asylum seekers

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how asylum seekers and refugees experience urban greenspaces. Whilst often overlooked in a focus on support services and integration, we argue that critically exploring the importance of urban greenspaces has wider implications for understanding how asylum seekers and refugees navigate experiences of displacement and resettlement. Drawing on empirical work foregrounding refugee experiences in Berlin, London, and Sheffield, we found that spending time outdoors in local recreational spaces such as parks, can have positive outcomes for wellbeing and inclusion, with the potential to support respite and the beginnings of belonging. However, though there were multiple positive accounts, especially of busier parks and of appreciating nature, many participants were uncertain or anxious about using parks. The interviews highlight the multiple barriers faced by asylum seekers and refugees, regarding information, legibility and in gaining the cultural capital and confidence needed venture out. The varied experiences reflect the diversity of greenspace typologies in Northern European cities, and also how individuals weight up public perceptions and, for some, the insecurity of their legal status. In unpacking the interaction between these barriers, we define and propose 'curated sociability' approaches as possible frameworks for supporting egalitarian participation and offering pathways to greater engagement. We conclude by highlighting a range of interventions that offer situated opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees to engage with urban greenspaces, and which provide insights into how the expectations and rules of urban greenspace are actively negotiated and may be rewritten.

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen an emerging concern with the informal and often highly precarious settlement of refugees in many European cities (Depraetere and Oosterlynck, 2017; Maestri, 2017; Picker and Pasquetti, 2015). A mixture of media and academic attention has examined how urban authorities have responded to refugee groups residing informally in parks, urban squares and squatted buildings, with responses ranging from eviction and displacement to formalization and regularization (Depraetere and Oosterlynck, 2017; Nordling et al., 2017). In these contexts, urban public spaces have been argued to play a key role in both foregrounding the political claims of refugees, and in offering space for survival in the midst of repressive citizenship regimes (Ataç, 2016; Bauder, 2016; Darling, 2017).

However, whilst recent attention has been drawn to the informal use of public spaces as sites of temporary pause within patterns of mobility, little has been done to examine the use of such spaces by asylum seekers and refugees for recreation or for building social connections. Here we are concerned less with the informal accommodation opportunities that urban public space may provide, and more with how intentional visits to urban greenspace can play a role in establishing points of respite and conviviality for asylum seekers and refugees. In this paper, we therefore explore how asylum seekers and refugees engage with urban parks, together with the limitations and potentials of this engagement. While the specificity of 'a park' as a bounded and designated area of land with a primary recreational focus is important, we draw here on the wider diversity of green space typologies, the network of publically accessible squares, river-sides, community growing plots and sports fields that characterise many cities and towns in northern Europe. Drawing on discussions that claim that multiculture and conviviality are essentially public urban qualities (see Amin, 2012; Neal et al., 2015), we argue that whilst engaging in public is heavily conditioned by constraints of citizenship, confidence, and cultural competency, opportunities to benefit from urban greenspaces as sites of

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wellbeing are also evident.

In a context of repressive policies towards migrants of many forms (Fekete, 2017), and cuts to support services for asylum seekers and refugees (Darling, 2016a), it may appear easy to dismiss the use of parks as a topic of concern for those seeking safety in new societies. However, we suggest that it is precisely these factors of insecurity and poor living conditions associated with asylum systems across Europe that highlight the relevance of exploring resources for wellbeing and integration, and that use of urban parks could indeed provide mundane but meaningful benefit. Some foundation to this contention is provided by a well established literature base that publically accessible urban greenspace has multiple values for city residents, in particular through enabling connections to nature (Cooper et al., 2014), providing locations for informal socialising (Neal et al., 2015), and opportunities for physical exercise (Romagosa et al., 2015). Whilst past research has highlighted the significant health benefits of parks for asylum seekers and refugees (Rishbeth and Finney, 2006; Coughlan and Hermes, 2016), the scope of these studies is limited and offers only brief insights into the more holistic benefits of being outdoors. As such, this paper offers a first analysis of how asylum seekers, refugees, and those working in the refugee sector of three European cities understand the role of urban parks in the lives of asylum seekers and refugees.

In making this argument, the paper develops as follows. We begin by outlining how understandings of experiences of urban places (arguing for a multi-scalar approach that also examines the relationship between the bounded quality of the park and the wider urban public realm) intersect with work on asylum seekers and refugees, suggesting that the production of a 'hostile environment' towards migrants offers little opportunity or impetus to explore urban greenspace. We then outline our fieldwork in Berlin, London, and Sheffield before turning to the narratives of asylum seekers, refugees, and those supporting them. We explore the role of urban green space in establishing points of familiarity in new places, then the constraints and anxieties associated with being in public, and provide a summary of how these relate to different typologies of greenspace and residential settings. Finally, we consider different forms of curated sociability, and how these may be used as means to encourage sociality and confidence in urban greenspace.

2. Hostile environments as shaping experience of urban greenspace

2.1. Mobility and passivity in a 'hostile environment'

While asylum and migration is often theorised in the context of mobility (see Schapendonk et al., 2018), the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees regularly involves long periods of being involuntarily stuck in spaces and positions of marginality, as asylum policies across Europe have focused on 'managing migration' through the selective filtering of mobility and its temporalities (Conlon, 2011; Griffiths, 2014; Mountz, 2011). In the UK, this governmental approach has been most forcefully present in the Conservative government's desire to produce a 'hostile environment' for migrants deemed unworthy of a place in Britain. Whilst such a language has had tangible policy implications, including making landlords legally responsible for checking the immigration status of their tenants, this environment is not a new one. As Bloch and Schuster (2005) illustrate, through a mixture of dispersal, detention, and deportation measures, successive UK governments have sought to make the asylum system a discomforting one, disrupting social networks and undermining forms of support for vulnerable individuals. The enforced mobility of asylum seekers through dispersal is just one example of this discomfort (Darling, 2011), and has been argued to significantly undermine trust in the UK legal system (Hynes, 2009), and perpetuate a framing of asylum seekers as 'burdens' on the state (Darling, 2016b).

The effects of this turn to a 'hostile environment' are also manifest in the maintenance of an assumed passivity on the part of those seeking refugee status often described by asylum seekers themselves as 'limbo' (e.g. Kohli and Kaukko, 2017). Whilst asylum policy has focused on regulating and controlling the everyday lives of those in the asylum system (see Burridge and Gill, 2017; Gill, 2016), wider policies focused on managing migration have promoted a 'neo-assimilationist' approach (Waite, 2012), which privileges specific, and highly selective, routes to citizenship (Byrne, 2014). In this context, ever greater emphasis has been placed on learning, and performing, ideals of national identity, values, and culture, such that 'integration' represents a process of adaptive moulding, whereby diverse migrants *become* citizens with the knowledge, cultural traits, and capital to 'fit' in the UK (Anderson, 2013).

Importantly, these discussions of integration, passivity, and citizenship, have increasingly moved beyond a focus on the traditional borders of the nation-state, and have considered how such issues emerge in, and through, contemporary cities (see Darling, 2017; Lebuhn, 2013). In doing so, such work has explored the constraints on mobility, agency, and opportunities for employment, that asylum seekers and refugees often face, and the ways in which those challenges are often exacerbated by hostile policies, enforced poverty and unwelcoming urban contexts (see Hinger et al., 2016; Phillimore and Goodson, 2008). We argue that these constraints, demands and discomforts, though clearly impacting on individuals differently, inevitably shape experiences and encounters within the public urban realm, and give a particularity to this study within the broader body of research of migration and place experience.

2.2. Understanding difference as informing experiences of urban outdoor environments

Leisure use of public open space is culturally embedded, shaped by collective values and histories, and as such, 'park practices' (Neal et al., 2015) are neither neutral nor universal. Indeed, how parks and urban greenspaces are understood, how they are engaged with, and the opportunities for sociality they may or may not present, means that understanding the role of urban greenspace requires contextualisation within wider discussions of urban conviviality and the potential affordances of urban public space. Here, a range of work has highlighted the significance of urban public space to the negotiations of diversity (Madanipour, 2010; Pickner, 2016; Sandercock, 2003). In particular, discussions of conviviality and 'everyday multiculture' have sought to highlight not only how cities are constituted by significant degrees of proximate diversity and histories of past and present migrations (Back and Sinha, 2016; Noble, 2009; Wise, 2016), but also how the negotiation of such diversity in and through public space, are essential components of living with difference (Watson, 2009; Wilson, 2011; Powell and Rishbeth, 2012). Whilst drawing on such insights to consider urban greenspace, we examine how the limits of conviviality may be foregrounded when read through the 'hostile environments' faced by asylum seekers and refugees, and how these shape experiences of parks as a specific type of urban public space.

Research specifically with refugees and asylum seekers has highlighted how facilitated 'nature based leisure', 'horticultural therapy', and the informal use of urban greenspaces can have potential for wellbeing. A range of benefits are identified which include; the relief from stress afforded through giving attention to nature; the distraction of focusing on new tasks; and the provision of times of respite and laughter with friends and families (Hurly and Walker, 2017; Rishbeth and Finney, 2006; Su, 2017). These accounts reflect many of the key themes that are commonly highlighted in multiple research projects that underline how mundane contact with natural environments can be beneficial for mental health (Cooper et al., 2014; Bragg et al., 2015), and should be seen as of particular significance given the health challenges experienced by many refugees and asylum seekers (Mind, 2009; WWPSAR, 2016). Greenspace is often foregrounded here as a

recreational resource, with research framed around notions of continuing practices of greenspace use developed in previous 'home' locations and connecting with memories of past environments (Rishbeth and Powell, 2013; Nagel and Staeheli, 2008; Ehrkamp, 2005; Baker; 2004). Across the varied demographics of urban dwellers, the importance of the materiality of nature connection (such as those with plants and various non-human interactions, Aalto and Ernstson, 2017) and the temporal experiential qualities of being outdoors (including views and seasonal experiences, Olwig, 2005), more naturalistic green spaces and growing spaces can be highly valued as a contrast to the busyness of a high density urban environment.

Despite the seeming inclusivity of these positive experiences, parks and other types of urban greenspace have been critiqued as places of limited diversity, and as places where asylum seekers, refugees, and other migrant groups can feel insecure or unwelcome. A common claim is that people from BAME backgrounds (Black and Minority Ethnic – not necessarily first generation migrants) are less frequent users of urban greenspace (Burt et al., 2013; Kloek et al., 2013; Maeer et al., 2012; Konijnendijk et al., 2013). For instance, Byrne and Wolch (2009) argue that a range of factors frame this exclusion, including marginality (the impact of socio-economic barriers), ethnicity (historic and culturally informed preferences, with the potential to change as a result of assimilation processes), and discrimination (the experience of discrimination and hostility). In recognising the limitations of these factors, they call for a better understanding of intersectionality within nature-social dynamics. Though the broad picture of parks as relatively homogenous and 'white' urban spaces may well be reflective of many locations, this is dependent on the geographic location and typology of different parks. For instance, a number of studies (often undertaken in urban contexts of high ethnic diversity) highlight the value of urban parks as places of low key inclusion, and represent local realities of 'unpanicked multiculturalism' (Neal et al., 2015; Cattell et al., 2008; Koutrolikou, 2012).

Perceptions of the neighbourhood context are vitally important here, not least because the environments into which refugees and asylum seekers are dispersed are central to their experiences of settlement and belonging (Spicer, 2008; Valentine et al., 2009). As Spicer (2008) highlights, the vital importance of perceptions of neighbourhoods as 'including' or 'excluding' shapes how readily individuals engage with the people and environments around them. Perceived levels of safety using parks are undoubtedly important, as underlined by Rishbeth et al.'s discussion of BAME parks users who cited parks and greenspaces as 'problematic localities, probably due to the low levels of use which can make users, especially young people, feel vulnerable to hate crime' (2018, p.48). These questions of location, safety, and perceptions of security, are all tied, in part, to the political positioning of asylum seekers and refugees as unwelcome 'burdens' at both national and local scales.

So in this research we hold in tension the notion of urban greenspace as both bounded spaces (such as a park or a community garden) and as reflective of the wider experiential qualities of the cityscape. It is not desirable or possible to *only* talk about parks, and therefore a methodologically messier 'slippage' of focus needs to span different scales within the urban environment to attend appropriately to experiences of 'being outside'.

3. 'Curated Sociability'

The dimensions of the asylum experience, of waiting, insecurity, and assumed passivity, all serve to shape how asylum seekers and refugees engage with urban greenspaces in ways not fully accounted for in discussions of urban multiculture and convivial diversity. By starting with the specificity of this experience, we explore not only the limits of access to urban green space experienced by asylum seekers and refugees, but also the notion and forms of 'curated sociability' that potentially offer footholds of access and belonging.

We propose the term 'curated sociability' in part to highlight the varied strategies, technologies, and projects that can be used to support asylum seekers and refugees in visiting and benefiting from urban greenspace, with particular consideration given to the high levels of social isolation of these potential users. These approaches might be mentoring or befriending schemes that enhance access to parks, gardening projects that offer points of contact and shared labour in a context of social difference, or low-barrier activities such as table tennis that allow for the co-existence of different users (Amin, 2008; Back and Sinha, 2016; Farías, 2016). They may be initiated and sustained primarily by refugee support organisations or greenspace providers but may also emerge through refugee-led groups. In contexts where encountering urban green space may be unsettling, these forms of intervention offer points of initial contact and orientation that can support an informed confidence.

The etymology of 'curation' is relevant here, deriving from the Latin *curare* 'to take care' (Obrist, 2014). The action of curating is a purposeful sharing of passion, inviting engagement between the 'more experienced' and the 'newcomer', developing meaning and experience (Obrist, 2014; Michaliszyn, no date). In the art world a 'curator' is increasingly seen as an 'active producer' who 'prompts dialogue by bringing artists, places and publics together' (Puwar and Sharma, 2012). By curating we understand different forms of mediating greenspace experiences that involve engaging in social practices that have a purpose of providing some type of connection (be that person to person, or person to place). Rather than simply providing organisational frameworks, the approaches we discuss are relational, considered practices of paying attention to the individual, which can make experiences of unfamiliarity less fearful. 'Curated sociability' thus reflects intentional action rather than simply observations of 'what happens'. In doing so, it addresses a more active framing in comparison to other common descriptors within the field of diversity and public space, such as conviviality (Gilroy, 2004), everyday multiculturalism (Wise and Velayutham, 2009) or Amin's notion of 'micropublics of everyday social contact and encounter' (2002: 959).

Before examining these possibilities further, we briefly discuss the research on which this paper is based.

4. Methodology

The paper draws on a wider project that was funded to explore the extent to which public open spaces offer forms of 'welcome' to refugees and asylum seekers in northern European contexts (Rishbeth et al., 2017). We examined whether public open spaces can provide a sense of inclusion and respite for asylum seekers and refugees in the midst of the difficulties of arriving, waiting for documents, and settling in new environments. Our project was co-designed and co-produced by a mixed team of academics and non-government organisations, with the ambition to inform practice among refugee support networks and the greenspace sector (Facer and Enright, 2016). To do so, we worked closely with a range of stakeholders and explored potential pathways for increasing the benefit of greenspace use within existing practices and initiatives.

Building on these networks within the refugee support and greenspace sector, we based our fieldwork in three locations (Berlin, London, and Sheffield), so as to engage a range of voices and perspectives on experiences of urban greenspace. We chose Sheffield, a mid-size city in northern England, for its long tradition of being a 'sanctuary city' and accommodating significant numbers of asylum seekers. Within London, we worked in the borough of Tower Hamlets as it represented one of the city's 'super-diverse' boroughs, and for decades has served as a main migration gateway for immigrants arriving in the city. Examining Berlin, a city at the forefront of accommodating refugees through Germany's response to the 'refugee crisis', offered an opportunity to consider how experiences of urban green space operate in the context of a city adapting to new arrivals in significant numbers. In each case, we

set out to examine how public spaces are used by asylum seekers and refugees and to what extent they currently act as a resource for refuge support networks.

The choice of multiple fieldwork sites was not underpinned by a rationale of comparison, but by a motivation to articulate experiences across variations of context. So in this research we were able to examine public space use in different socio-legal frameworks (Germany and the UK), greenspace infrastructures offered in both high-density capital cities and lower-density second-tier cities, and some differences in cultural expectations and management of urban parks. Building on these insights, throughout the paper we highlight how interactions of geographic and social contexts can inform actions and preferences, and give an overview of these in section 7.

Across these three cities, we worked with two groups of respondents. Firstly, we conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with asylum seekers and refugees of different nationalities, together with a series of informal conversations conducted in drop-in centres as part of participant observations of these spaces in each city. Our interviewees had different migration trajectories and legal statuses. The majority had arrived in the research locations between four weeks and two years prior to our engagement with them, with the longest established living in the country of arrival for over seven years. In Berlin, most of our interviewees had refugee status or temporary refugee status. The majority of these were Syrian refugees who, at the time, were subject to faster asylum processing than other national groups, causing some resentment from other refugee groups. In the UK, our sample consisted mainly of those who were waiting for decisions on their asylum applications, some whose applications had been refused, and one family resettled as part of the 'Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme'. In each city, respondents were accessed through support networks and organisations. The scope and design of these interviews did not require the respondents to identify as 'park visitors' but focused on recounting experiential responses to urban locations with particular attention given to various types of greenspace use, set within narratives framed around arrival, orientation, the rhythms of a 'normal day', and means of learning and sharing. They were conducted in English (UK interviews) or Arabic (Berlin interviews).

Secondly, we conducted 35 interviews with a range of stakeholders from both the refugee support sector (such as orientation services, conversation clubs, and mental health services) and the greenspace sector (including green space management, design, advocacy, community support) in each city. To further develop this knowledge base, we also researched case studies in which refugees are supported in a range of initiatives using urban greenspace from across Europe, and produced a handbook of these cases to inform professional and voluntary sector practice (Author, 2017).

Our analytical approach drew on the varied expertise of our interdisciplinary research team to interrogate the research data produced through these differing processes. This involved a dialogical relationship between the fieldwork and analysis, in which the material emerging from the interviews was available to all members of the research team in order for emerging ideas and themes to be fed back into ongoing fieldwork. Our collective analysis was crystalized at team workshops and then adapted and refined through a series of stakeholder workshops and meetings in which the findings were discussed and further feedback was incorporated from different sectors and national contexts.

5. 'Feeling like myself': finding connectedness and respite

The daily life of asylum seekers and refugees is often a disconcerting mix of busyness and limbo, with seemingly little mental or physical space for wellbeing, for recreation or playfulness (see Conlon, 2011; Hynes, 2009). And yet, our research found glimpses of how individuals did 'find space' for these qualities, in part though visiting local parks.

'*In Berlin, it is very special, you see green space all around you'*. Rima (a Syrian refugee) was one of a number of our interviewees who was surprised at the number of urban parks in northern Europe. She talked about her pleasure at visiting her local park, sometimes alone, sometimes with her husband, and how walking around and sitting outside gives her the chance to feel peaceful and relaxed amidst the losses in her life.

Interviewees who had arrived in Europe with their children were more likely to consider urban greenspaces as having potential for leisure and socialising, and during conversations were quick to identify parks on google maps and explain how they used them. Khalid, who arrived with his family in London as part of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme recalls how his family quickly became regular visitors of a large historic park in East London. '*Victoria Park – most of our spare time we go there. Especially the BMX area and the playground. [The children] have bikes and often take them to the park'*.

Visiting a park was articulated by some as an accessible way of temporarily escaping from the burden of everyday troubles. Najwa, a Syrian Palestinian currently living in Berlin, told us that whenever she felt stressed she would go to the lake near her house on her own to relax and calm down, often without her children or husband. Hozan, a solo asylum seeker from Iran (interviewed in Sheffield) would frequently sit on a bench in his local park to clear his mind, marshal his thoughts and have a smoke. Though finding time to be alone was valued by some, the highly managed central parks and squares were more commonly mentioned as preferred places to spend time. Reda, an asylum seeker from Uzbekistan, noted that 'I like spending time in Peace Gardens, I especially like watching kids playing with water', referring to the central green square in the middle of Sheffield with a fountain in the middle. The general busyness of central squares meant that a non-directive way of spending time, mostly people watching, was a common pleasure rather than reflective of the (enforced) idleness of 'the limbo'.

While these accounts indicate something of the value of urban greenspace to individuals, the following sections explore in more detail the experiential aspects (positive and negative) of how places are perceived, drawing attention to the significance of social positionings and dynamics.

5.1. The restorative qualities of finding familiarity

Khalid imagined that in coming to London he would be coming to 'paradise', but the first day was not as he expected, and the house they were allocated was 'uncomfortable and depressing'. Not knowing places to hang out or socialize, or any people who could help, they started exploring the neighbourhood independently. As he noted,

> 'I was first scared when they just left us here – we did not know anything. But we decided to walk around and found some people, some shops and bought some Pepsi. Then we felt comfortable after this' (Khalid, London/Syria)

In Berlin, many of our refugee interviewees spoke about looking for a similar sense of connectedness through going to places that would offer a sense of familiarity in an unfamiliar situation.

> 'The first thing she wanted to do in Berlin is to visit places which reminds her of her home country. She visits the district Neukoln, which is called the 'Arab Area'. She entered the Arabic shops and had a meal in a Syrian restaurant. This helped her to stabilize herself at the beginning' (Fieldwork notes, interview with Tamara from Syria).

Finding glimpses of familiarity in an urban realm is relatively unsurprising. Not least because, as Hall (2015) argues of 'superdiverse streets', cosmopolitan cities draw together in proximity an array of cultural influences and forms. Huizinga and van Hoven (2018, p. 316) reflecting Ehrkamp (2005) discuss these ethnically specific locations as places of belonging but also potential 'stepping stones' of transcultural connection. We were interested in exploring whether the less distinctive

forms of urban nature could also support connections in this way.

For some respondents, moments of familiarity and memory were indeed brought to the fore through engaging with urban greenspaces in ways that fostered connections back to past environments.

> "He takes his oldest son (10 years old) to the lake, either walking or by bicycle and they spend nice time together. What he likes the most is the nature of the place. Green space with some ducks in the lake, seeing the birds flying in front of your eyes. He likes this nature since his childhood. He likes to watch the birds flying and the fish swimming. In Syria, his favourite hobby was fishing. He would like to do the same in Berlin, but he needs the equipment and official permission. While he is in the garden near the lake he feels happiness". [Researcher fieldnotes, interview with Hayyan from Syria]

Usually the sense of familiarity is more nuanced; prompted by some of the facilities and activities available in parks and squares. Interviewees spoke about these experiences as enabling them to 'feel again like themselves' or to 'reconnect' with their old selves. Use of parks and squares seemed to allow temporary foregrounding of parts of their identities that had been neglected throughout the migration journey and dismissed by the process of claiming asylum or undergoing resettlement. A group facilitator who works with refugee young people commented on the sense of release and freedom that spending time outdoors with a friendship group can bring, and gave an example of how some Afghani teenage boys felt able to exchange embraces in a park context in ways that they had learnt to inhibit in other locations. The 'ways of being' offered by sensory and experiential qualities of being outside reflected also a time past, a grounding effect that gives respite from current experience of being in limbo within the waiting of the asylum system.

5.2. Opportunities for connection

Urban greenspaces and the activities they enable offer potential for the development of less hierarchical and passive connections than most situations encountered by refugees and asylum seekers (see Askins, 2016). Establishing footholds through engagement in urban greenspaces requires a presence and response in relation to other people. In exploring notions of belonging and social relationships, Probyn (1996, p.5) argues that the experience of spending time outside 'inspires a mode of thinking about how people get along, how various forms of belonging are articulated, how individuals conjugate difference into manners of being, and how desires to become are played out in everyday circumstances'. We gained an insight into the connective affordances of being outside through Khalid's account of using his visits to Victoria Park.

> 'When we sit in the park we say hello to people. When we see someone with an Arabic face we talk to them, but we talk to anyone if they can understand our English'. (Khalid, London/Syria)

At best, activities in public or semi-public spaces provide times and places of contact between newcomers and longstanding residents, where companionship can be found by 'doing alongside' rather than extended conversations. Participation can be enabled by informal, easy-to-understand ways to join in as one person among many: pushing a swing in a playground, sitting on a bench in a sunny courtyard, watching a performance at a summer fete or throwing a frisbee in a park. These minor activities of sociality and engagement with urban green space were significant in offering restorative activities that did not rely on immigration status. "I would see no purpose in going [to parks] on my own" said Firuz, an Iranian living in Sheffield, who recently received his refugee status "but from a moment where my friend introduced me to running, I take part in park running classes regularly". Both playing sport (basketball, football) and watching sport was something commonly mentioned by male participants, echoing arguments for the importance of 'pick-up' sport as a social connection, and indeed the 'first step into friendships and social networks' for new arrivals (Wise et al., 2018). Feeling a sense of connection does not necessarily require interaction. Even experiences of 'being alone' can be conceptualised differently in outdoor public contexts. Sami profoundly missed the network of social relationships in his homeland, Syria, and talked about how he felt 'isolated and strange' when sitting alone in Berlin restaurants. But he found some solace by spending time in Berlin's parks and gardens, and valued being a part of these relaxed public settings.

Given that in the UK asylum seekers are unable to work and receive minimal forms of finance support, those within the asylum system are often unable to engage in more costly social activities and thus find boredom and isolation significant challenges to their own health and wellbeing. In this context, visibility and presence can be important: the experience of 'how you see and how you are seen' (Rose, 2003, p.72) in urban green spaces offer ways for newcomers to simultaneously notice differences – in use, history, culture, climate - but also to recognize and enjoy moments of shared and familiar experience. The collective and cumulative nature of these moments not only creates recent memories of 'better times', but also a notion of what respite might start to feel like in this new (and often hostile) country.

6. Uncertainty, aggression and the anxieties of urban green spaces

Despite many positive accounts related to the quality and accessibility of urban greenspaces, interviewees also spoke about a sense of unease about exploring public spaces in general and venturing into urban parks. These experiences had two key facets: uncertainty about understanding different codes of behaviour in certain places, and fears centred on personal safety (related to being refugees or asylum seekers). Thus while urban parks offered possibilities for more relaxed and informal activities, they were also experienced as alienating, unfriendly and unwelcoming by some users. Many of our participants felt culturally lost, unwelcome, or simply too lonely to be able to enjoy them in full.

6.1. Cultural loss and (mis)understanding 'park practices'

For the majority of our interviewees, the information they received on arrival to their new home and city was partial, fragmented, and often rushed ('dropped off', rather than 'introduced', said Khalid in London). Very rarely did their formal orientation include 'quality of life' resources such as the location and opportunities provided in local parks.

Building on this sense of disorientation, many of our interviewees found their new environments very different from what they had previously known. 'It felt very different than my country, there was no sunshine, no desert' commented Hozan, reflecting on the disparities between Iran and England. Though many of the participants appreciated the abundance of greenery, the difference in the social, cultural and physical landscape also contributed to a sense of loss. Almost all of our research participants mentioned the harshness of the European winter. Feeling cold and sun-deprived, highlighted the sensory and bodily experiences of migration and belonging, and could magnify the sense of emotional alienation of arriving in unknown places, echoing a visceral feeling of being bodies 'out of place' (Cresswell, 1996).

While practical challenges such as using public transport are easier to teach yourself, many newcomers found the expectation of behaviour in less formal kinds of urban greenspace hard to decipher. A younger Syrian man in Berlin talked about how important children are within Syrian culture, and recounted a story to show how this could be interpreted differently in Germany. In a park, he and a friend had exchanged some pleasantries with a German woman and her children, and it all seemed friendly until he patted the child on the head "and then she snatched the children away" (Fieldwork notes, Berlin 2017).

Some of these dynamics of cultural dissonance extend also to ideas

of recreation and leisure in outdoor places – the 'purpose' of parks. A few interviewees commented that they found parks 'too quiet' (echoing annoyance about 'empty streets' from male Syrian refugees in the Netherlands (Huizinga and van Hoven, 2018, p.314)). For instance, one refugee host in Sheffield was surprised to find that a friend of hers, a refugee women with young children, didn't think of going to a playground in a nearby park. She suggested that this was because parks are not available in so many countries, 'you are not bought up to think it's what children must do'. Notions of the relative novelty or normality of park-going certainly differed immensely between participants, and the extent to which difference is welcomed, or not, can be strongly connected to existing vulnerabilities. As Sarah, the manager of a destitution centre in London, noted, in times of high uncertainty, refugees and asylum seekers often expressed a preference for indoor places that feel more predictable and therefore safer. This question of uncertainty and confidence is central to the ways in which asylum seekers and refugees discussed their relationship with new environments. Indeed, as Mercy described; "You need to have a certain kind of boldness to settle in a new place," (Mercy, Kenyan/London). It is this issue of 'boldness' that we turn to next.

6.2. Confidence to venture out and concerns for safety

When life is complicated and unsettling, gathering the confidence to venture beyond the front door can be difficult. Lack of legal certainty and the 'limbo' of waiting for a decision on an asylum application influenced interviewees' mental and emotional states, and a number of our interviewees reported that when life seemed particularly hard they did not want to go outside. One interviewee reflected that he did not venture out at all on some days. "He does not like that anyone sees him while he is stressed or feeling angry" [Fieldworker notes, Syrian refugee in Berlin].

Refugees and asylum seekers often exercise caution with particular reference to their own safety. Interviewees nearly all recounted first or second hand experience of hate crimes and abuse in public spaces, and were highly aware of their own vulnerability in this respect. "Don't come near me", and "I will let you go this time, but if I see you next time I will kill you" were examples of threats reported in the interviews in Sheffield. These forms of explicit abuse inevitably served to shape perceptions of public space, with parks being no exception to this. Zenith said that 'parks are often seen as places for indigenous people and not for people who came abroad' with reference especially to some of the suburban parks in predominantly white areas of Sheffield that made him feel uneasy even after living in the UK for a number of years. Similarly, Firuz told us that 'sometimes it's about certain feeling – like you enter the place and you do not feel right'. Thus; 'There are some areas in Sheffield that are not as welcoming as others. I know people whose windows were broken. My window was broken, but I lived in a very 'white' area'. Experiences such as these reflect wider concerns over the locations of asylum seeker dispersal in the UK. With asylum seekers presented as 'burdens' within political rhetoric and press coverage (Darling, 2016a), and often located in what Spicer (2008) terms 'excluding' neighbourhoods, it is unsurprising to find that the confidence to engage with urban greenspace was sometimes absent in many of our respondents. Refugees and asylum seekers were also commonly aware of parks which were known as venues for drug dealing, and though stakeholders noted that some migrants (especially undocumented) are drawn into illegal activities, our interviewees were keen to avoid these locations.

Alongside perceptions of race, nationality, and criminality, the intersections of gender and legal status with migrant identities, also came to the fore. Racism in this context was refracted through common experiences of sexism: "It's got harder and harder for women in certain areas to sit on a bench without being hassled" (female volunteer at a refugee support organisation, Sheffield). Being 'alone' in public spaces was clearly seen as more problematic for women than men, leading to self-imposed curfews. Difference in dress can lead to a greater (and problematic) feeling of hyper-visibility. Rasha, a Syrian woman commented on her perception of 'people looking at me in a strange way' at a lakeside location in a Berlin park where people go swimming. She emphasised that she has 'no problem' seeing other women wearing shorts and bikinis, but feels that they might be judging her in her headscarf, and describes this experience as 'still feeling like a stranger'.

Anxieties around public open space use were also significantly reinforced by the legal status of our interviewees. The more uncertain the status of our interviewees, the less likely they were to explore their neighbourhoods and cities, and the more likely they were to see public spaces as threatening. Especially in the capital cities of London and Berlin, public spaces which were well known as places where migrants congregate presented the risk of being stopped by police and deported. Refugee support organisations highlighted a tension between parks being simultaneously places of temporary residence, and places of significant vulnerability for the undocumented. For people experiencing the threat of deportation, greenspaces were far from egalitarian and welcoming places, but dangerous and contested sites of violent power relations.

These examples illuminate the limits of an apparently 'unpanicked multiculturalism' in urban green space, and question the ability to fully participate in the conviviality that green public spaces can offer (Noble, 2009, p.51; Rishbeth and Rogaly, 2017). Experiencing egalitarian access and confidently being present in public outdoor spaces was not something that all our participants enjoyed. Having confidence in being physically safe is vital, but a less tangible factor is the sense that it is possible to 'fit-in'. An affective experience of 'fitting in' may be related to legitimacy afforded by taking part in a specific activity (such as playing sport or looking after kids) or because of an ability to 'be unremarkable' due to the high diversity reflected in other park users (Neal et al., 2015).

7. Greenspace typologies and residential contexts

Our findings therefore hold in tension the experience of urban greenspace for refugees and asylum seekers as welcoming, pleasurable and restorative, *and also* unsettling and potentially risky. Most of our participants could describe all of these emotions in relation to different experiences of being outdoors, highlighting again the importance of context to understanding the nuances of these experiences. Before considering how an approach focused on 'curated sociality' might draw from these nuances to address the barriers some felt in using urban greenspace, we briefly turn to the wider contexts that conditioned park use across these three cities. More specifically, through our empirical work we gained insight into the preferences asylum seekers and refugees expressed in relation public open space, outlining different types of urban greenspace as sites to visit and sites to avoid. On this basis, we developed an indicative typological analysis of common characteristics, drawing on both the design of the space and its location within the city.

Mostly commonly mentioned as preferred places to spend time were highly managed central parks and squares, exemplified by Alexanderplatz in Berlin (a large central plaza, also a tourist destination) or the Peace Gardens in Sheffield. These squares are easy to find and travel to, were argued to be safe (partly due to the presence of additional security), and offered plentiful seating opportunities. The number and diversity of users 'hanging out' in such spaces was argued to mean that it was easier to fit in, both as someone who was not white-European, and as someone with time to spend (Rishbeth and Rogaly, 2017). Their location within the city, city-centre rather than suburban, underscores this sense of mutual territory.

Also preferred were larger parks with multiple facilities, places where it is possible to hang out with others, for children to play, and potentially to join in with sport activities. Participants resident in Berlin and London, where there is a high density of housing (and subsequently lower levels of access to private gardens), and where in many

neighbourhoods the local population is very ethnically diverse, often perceived these places as welcome resources. At a design scale, these parks offered numerous edge spaces and a high level of visual permeability, different levels of participation, and a non-demanding sharing in 'elective leisure' (Neal et al., 2015).

Parks and urban greenspaces with fewer facilities and with more naturalistic features (such as woodland, informal grassland, lakes and streams), engendered strong feelings both for and against from different participants. National context may be significant here. Berlin participants, both male and female and mostly Syrian refugees, often preferred highly 'naturalised' environments, enjoying walking around the lakes, finding hill viewpoints, and waterfalls. Though many British cities also have good access to such 'natural' environments, these nature-focused narratives were mostly absent from interviews in London and Sheffield. Participants resident in the UK were more likely to discuss such naturalistic parks as strangely quiet and boring, and felt no motivation for visiting them. Often located in predominately white suburban areas, they were perceived by some as places where one would stand out rather than fit in, reflecting long-standing debates over the ethnic exclusivity of English 'natural' environments, such as National Parks (see Kinsman, 1995; Neal and Agyeman, 2006).

This embryonic typological approach starts to ground the findings in the specificity of landscape qualities, but is necessarily limited in representing the complexity of social positionings and dynamics relating to participants' lives. In practice, narratives of place intersect with individual lived experiences of constraint and opportunity. For instance, though Alexanderplatz was a common preference of Syrian refugees (who have rights of residency), undocumented migrants living in Berlin learnt to avoid the location as a common venue for immigration enforcement sweeps. Feeling safe in naturalistic areas can be significantly shaped by gender, and informed by understandings of nature in home countries. It is thus important to recognise how factors such as immigration status and ethnicity intersect in diverse ways to condition how urban greenspaces, and the capacity and competence to engage with them, are interpreted in everyday life.

8. Towards a 'curated sociability' of parks and urban greenspace

With this concern for a set of contextual preferences for certain forms of urban greenspace, and the intersectional barriers that cut across such preferences in mind, we argue that forms of 'curated sociality' may offer one form of response to the often risky and unsettling aspects of urban greenspace. In this section, we thus discuss how intentional approaches can go some way to realistically addressing barriers, and therefore extend the positive experiences and benefits of using parks for refugees and asylum seekers.

For some of our research participants, the 'loose space' qualities of parks (Franck and Stevens, 2006) – the relative flexibility and adaptability compared to indoor locations - was the main driver for visiting, especially those who saw them as a destination for respite. However, more common were concerns about the ambiguity of these places, and these were heightened by the mundane reality of a very limited social context in which to gain confidence. Put simply, going with a friend helps. However, all refugees and asylum seekers have had their social networks hugely disrupted both through the mobility of displacement and through the institutional enforcement of dispersal (Hynes, 2009).

From the accounts of our interviewees, many of the barriers related to access and use of public green spaces were reduced where there was some way of *finding* company for visiting parks, which for many meant some degree of facilitation. Most forms of facilitation involved more organised activities such as sport or recreational activities, or taking indoor activities outside, though for some refugees a similar benefit was found through informal peer networks or befriending schemes. One of the aspects of this 'curation' was informing a sense of purpose: helping asylum seekers and refugees to perceive urban green spaces as destinations for sociability. The company of a friend or group of 'known others' helped people to feel at ease about venturing out and spending time in parks, transforming narratives of these spaces from sites of social anxiety to places of potential sociability and belonging.

We conceptualise these varied forms of facilitation of greenspace experiences as 'curated sociability', and across the different research contexts we found they offered useful entry points to discover and appreciate the facilities of local greenspaces. In returning to the responsibilities of a curating role, O'Neill (2007) considers how the role of the curator in cultural contexts reflects an active engaged presence 'represented as having contingent forms of social exchange, […] caregiver, collaborator, cultural mediator, facilitator, negotiator, and cultural agitator' (p.13). Though these activities and approaches we surveyed were varied in intent, format and context, many of the characteristic qualities reflect something of this process of engagement: providing a social context, offering purpose and structure, foregrounding easy ways to join in, and developing a sense of agency to gradually establish footholds of belonging.

Within the research we specifically examined case studies which had sustained innovation in various ways of 'curating' interaction and familiarising people with local parks (ref anonymised). From collective walks organized by conversation clubs, to cycling training and outdoor located language classes, many refugee support groups were offering different ways for their 'clients' to spend time in public spaces, and discussed their observation of the benefits for health and integration (e.g. Refugee Action, 2015). The START initiative (Plymouth, UK) leads mixed groups of new students and asylum seekers on walks through the city's green spaces and nearby countryside. The founders discussed how these regular walks supported newcomers 'from people in need, to self-reliant contributors to their local communities' (START, no date). Such initiatives were important in reducing anxiety related to the exploration of public spaces: the activity is safe, the group context reduces the sense of 'unfit', and the repeated format provides a supportive structure within the often chaotic experience of settlement.

Hozan, an asylum seeker, whom we interviewed in Sheffield, stated that; 'I want to be useful, I want to be needed in society, be able to contribute'. Our asylum seekers participants who were less eager to explore urban greenspaces often perceived them as the extension of the 'nothing-to-do-ness' that characterized their daily life in the asylum system (see Conlon, 2011). 'Finding a niche' is one route to feeling a sense of belonging, and collective activities in outdoor places are one way in which refugees and asylum seekers can develop this. Sometimes it was about continuing passions that they had in previous stages of their life, such as gardening or playing a particular sport.

> 'In the evenings, I go to play football or watch football, there is a big park nearby my house with a basketball court and I go with my friends there. Every Friday we play football together'. (Maher, refugee in London)

In all three city locations, refugees and asylum seekers also took part in a range of gardening projects (often located in a semi-public form of urban greenspace) and gained similar benefits from a very different form of activity. A facilitator for Green City Action in Sheffield told us some of the dynamics of their twice weekly sessions at a collective allotment, attended by both refugees and other residents (mostly first or second generation migrants):

> 'Growing happens, a cup of tea happens, a lot of conversation happens, people are sharing words with each other, recipes are shared on quite a regular basis. People will bring food to share. They might take produce, and then often they will cook it, bring it back'.

As well as providing purpose and regularity, participants at the allotment were able to develop some new social connections and over time undertook small new responsibilities: cooking for others, taking regular care of plants and sharing knowledge. Over time, and to differing extents, these helped new residents restore a sense of autonomy. A founder of a therapeutic allotment project in London highlighted that

one of the most important dimensions for her 'clients' (all referred as part of a post-traumatic stress disorder programme) to rebuilding one's own sense of agency, was being able to develop a sense of ownership of this plot.

Clearly, the enclosed, secure and focused space of a community allotment has very different affordances and uses to a typical urban park, but by addressing a range of greenspaces it is possible to draw out the combination of invitation, purpose and activity that characterises 'curated sociability' approaches. These can start to bridge gaps in tacit knowledge, building footholds in new environments, but also importantly have the potential to provide an opportunity to contribute to these new environments, to leave a mark, 'a footprint'. The presence and initiative of asylum seekers and refugees can, at its best, also offer a broader change – shaping the use of greenspaces, being integral to the animation of these, and offering an egalitarian sharing of everyone's cultural connections and expertise (whether in growing or goal scoring). In the hostile environment of asylum, where people are treated as numbers, clients and cases, these approaches to bring people together outdoors not only have the potential to offer a wellbeing benefit, but also the potential to restore something of their identity as agentic human beings.

9. Conclusion: Making footholds, leaving footprints

In this paper, we have explored some of the ways in which asylum seekers and refugees engaged with urban greenspace, the potentials they saw in such spaces, the constraints they faced in accessing and using greenspace, and considered how various forms of intervention sought to respond to these constraints. The focus here is necessarily limited and partial, reflecting findings from respondents occupying various positions in hierarchies of citizenship and status. In concluding however, we want to draw out three points for further consideration.

First, is the importance of urban green space and its access for the wellbeing and, potentially, for the integration of asylum seekers and refugees. In a context of repressive policies towards migrants (Fekete, 2017), and cuts to support services for asylum seekers and refugees (Darling, 2016a), it may appear easy to dismiss the use of greenspaces as a priority for those seeking safety, security, and longer-term integration into new societies. Whilst understandable, we argue that this would be a mistake. In Berlin, London, and Sheffield, asylum seekers and refugees not only testified to the well-documented benefits of encountering urban green space, but they also indicated some of the ways in which being in public, negotiating park spaces, and finding spaces of familiarity through memories of nature, could help to enhance a sense of comfort in the midst of highly stressful experiences. We argue that this represents a low-key claim to space that can reflect something of a 'desire for attachment […] wanting to belong, wanting to become' as Probyn (1996, p.16) puts it, and echoes Tete's work on refugee notions of home as a space that 'fills practical as well as imaginative needs' (2012, p.113). This is not to deny the barriers and insecurities these groups faced, but to recognise that such barriers should not be allowed to negate the very real, and increasingly critical, wellbeing potentials of urban greenspace. For those living through a 'hostile environment', finding times and places of joy, distraction and agency can be an important counter-balance.

Second, as we have illustrated in discussing various forms of 'curated sociability', urban greenspaces can offer opportunities to create footholds in new environments for asylum seekers and refugees. We have explored how different typologies of greenspaces and greenspace activities may encourage or discourage participation. The 'curated sociability' approaches are situational, and as such are both shaped and limited by the qualities and resources of specific greenspaces and the political contexts that inform the daily lives of asylum seekers and refugees. So whilst forms of curated sociability may be useful interventions in establishing and enhancing moments of comfort, these never fully escape the bureaucratic frameworks of power and position in which asylum seekers and refugees are placed. But by foregrounding a relational context, they do offer the gradual development of networks of sociability, reflecting something of Wiseman's work with young asylum seekers in Glasgow, and the significance of being 'together-in-difference' as a means of scaffolding a wider politics of belonging (in press). It is these minor but significant acts that can help to orientate new arrivals in a city, and can develop moments of belonging in, and through, public space. Parks and greenspace thus offer opportunities for the establishment of such footholds. They have the potential to pause the bureaucratic constraints of asylum and refugee status, and focus instead on other aspects of everyday life in the city – from urban nature and memories of past environments, to shared pleasures of gardening, sport, or exploring new habitats. Whilst far from radical in their orientation, minor footholds of this kind can help shape moments of comfort in the midst of uncomfortable conditions.

Finally, the establishment of footholds for new arrivals necessarily also produces footprints in these urban environments. It is here that tensions between different user groups come to the fore as the use and appropriation of parks and greenspace by some can appear to exclude others, often reflecting embedded hierarchies informed by race, class and gender. Reflecting on these tensions, Nelson and Hiemstra (2008, p.337), note that "Spatial dynamics [can] produce invisibility or [can] provide opportunities for mutual recognition and respect". Recognising the footprints that are made by various user groups, from asylum seekers and refugees to more established residents, involves recognising that public spaces are constantly changing. This responsiveness is integral to resisting a normative 'pressure for the strange to be assimilated into the known' (Bennett and Crawley Jackson, 2017). Urban greenspaces are dynamic social formations, shaped by multiple users and, as a result, require active, but open and inclusive, management. Strunk and Richardson (2017) articulate this well in their discussion of urban gardening by refugees in Midwest America, recognising how material practices and personal agency can construct identities of belonging, but also challenge traditional assumptions of nature and urban space, opening up opportunities for different forms of place-making. In this paper we have sought to consider not only how asylum seekers and refugees may engage with urban greenspace, but also how those spaces are re-interpreted and at times re-made through such encounters. As cities across Europe attempt to respond to the opportunities and challenges of displacement and refugee resettlement, taking seriously the value of parks and green spaces to refugees is essential to both integration and wellbeing. At the same time, taking refugees seriously means recognising that parks and greenspaces across Europe are forever changing, and that the footprints of those displaced have a role to play in shaping parks as resources for a shared future.

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