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Places of Safety – Constructing Countries of Refuge

I like [a] safe country you know I don’t see any problem like this it’s better for me even I sleep outside no [one will] kill me no [one] makes problems


Introduction

There is a range of evidence to suggest that asylum-seekers in the UK are fleeing dangerous situations in their countries of origin as shown in the previous chapter. These situations include persecution based on: gender (Crawley, 2010); sexual violence and the murder of family members (Sherwood & Liebling-Kalifani, 2012); torture (Behnia, 2004); and oppression and violence (Neumayer, 2005). A unifying characteristic of asylum-seekers is that they are from areas experiencing conflict and a lack of human rights. Taken together, this suggests that asylum-seekers were born into extremely dangerous countries and have been forced to leave for reasons of safety. In this chapter it is shown how refugees construct the UK as a place of refuge and – importantly – safety, which constitutes a specific place-identity (Durrheim & Dixon, 2005). While the UK is presented as a place of safety, it is not necessarily presented as a happy place or an ideal place to live, but safety is placed above this. While safety provides the main explanation for asylum-seekers coming to the UK, asylum-seekers’ claims about safety are not always accepted (the following chapter addresses the notion of the ‘bogus’ asylum-seeker who is deemed to be interested in financial gain), so claims about asylum-seekers being interested in safety are shown to be contested and debated. In addition to this, the safety of the UK as a host country is also debated, with some suggesting that asylum-seekers being housed
in deprived communities can increase the safety in those areas, while others suggest that the presence of asylum-seekers can be damaging to safety.

**Asylum-seekers come to the UK to avoid danger**

A key way in which asylum-seekers construct the UK as a place of safety and refuge is to refer to its relative lack of dangers when compared with their country of origin. In the following examples it is demonstrated how a lack of danger in the UK is presented as the main reason why refuge has been sought there. This first extract comes from an interview with an asylum-seeker from Mauritius.

**Extract 4.1: Participant Five, England interview**

1. SB: You came on your own okay. So once you decided to leave
2. P5: was Britain the first place that you decided to come here =
3. SB: = Here in Coventry
4. P5: Okay so what was it about Britain that made you come here?
5. SB: Err this problem make me come in Coventry here
6. P5: Yeah what was it about the UK?
7. SB: UK is good (SB: yeah) because there is nice people here (SB: yeah) the law also is nice I respect the law (SB: yeah) I want to
8. P5: have my my leave to remain here (SB: okay) yes I like to live
9. SB: in the UK because I'm free here (SB: yeah) my life is not in danger (SB: yeah) and I feel the law also protect me
10. (Goodman, unpublished)

This extract begins with the interviewer (SB) asking the asylum-seeker if the UK was always her intended destination (l. 2). After the asylum-seeker clarifies the question (l. 3), the interviewer restates her question, asking about the features of Britain that caused her to choose it as her destination (‘what was it about Britain’ l. 4). This question arguably refers to the ongoing suggestion that asylum-seekers come to the UK for reasons other than safety (the next chapter focuses on the pervasive notion of the ‘bogus’ asylum-seeker who is really coming to the UK for financial gain; see also Goodman & Speer, 2007; Leudar, Hayes, Nekvapil & Baker, 2008). At the very least, such a question leaves open