21 Narratives of Service Provision: A Dialogical Perspective on the 'Support' of Asylum Seekers

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Overview

This chapter focuses upon some of the narratives of housing and 'support' service provision set against the backdrop of the support of asylum seekers in the United Kingdom. Since 1999 specific asylum seeker support teams have been established within a number of local authorities throughout the UK contracted to the Home Office to provide housing and social support to destitute asylum seekers. Currently, the regions of the UK, operate within a national legislative arena led by the Home Office whilst simultaneously negotiating the local expectations of local 'communities'. From this position these professionals are required to fulfil a range of often seemingly conflictual and contradictory roles including among others, housing provider, social carer, informal immigration control and community liaison. In recent research Sales and Hek (2004) have raised the issue of the tension that they perceive exists in the work of these professionals with asylum seekers between the 'care' of asylum seekers and the 'control' required by national legislation and policy. However, rather than professionals performing a 'balancing' between these seemingly 'conflictual' roles, as suggested by Sales and Hek (2004), what this chapter suggests is something that resonates with the Bakhtinian notion of 'polyphony' (Bakhtin, 1984). From this perspective the roles and duties of an asylum support professional are not approached from a position where a professional has to weigh up between the performance of either one role or another, where an individual worker can only fulfil these caring and controlling roles at separate times. Rather, it is recognised that roles and duties can be deployed equally and simultaneously where professionals can be *both* caring *and* at the same time controlling. What this chapter would like to suggest is that such simultaneous performance of a number of roles appears to enable the emergence of a seemingly unproblematic 'multi-voiced' worker that successfully negotiates between care, control, community, integration, and segregation and a variety of other positions and discourse.

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Background

In immigration terms asylum, at least in modern usage, is a relatively new concept. People have however, been fleeing their countries of origin because of persecution for centuries (Plaut, 1995). During this time many people have migrated to the United Kingdom seeking asylum and protection from persecution. For the most part this movement of people has been largely unrestricted. However, calls to 'control' the number of individuals being allowed to enter Britain began in earnest with the Aliens Act in 1905 (Schuster, 2003). It has been said that many of the immigrants that were living and arriving in the UK, particularly Gypsies from Eastern Europe, were at this time criminalised and storied as 'paupers', 'lunatics' and 'the diseased' (Holmes, 1991). Throughout the last century a focus on the need to control immigration to the UK has brought about a steadily increasing number of restrictions on who should enter and their reasons for doing so (Schuster, 2003). Entry via the asylum route however had largely escaped such restrictions and only became a main focus of immigration concern in the early 1990s. Subsequently, throughout the 1990s a number of pieces of legislation began to focus upon the steadily increasing number of people that became known as 'asylum seekers' and the effects that these individuals appeared to have on various economic and social factors (Schuster, 2003). A political focus on controlling these individuals argued that large numbers of asylum seekers were becoming an economic burden (Schuster, 2003) and that an apparent 'out of control' immigration system was connected to issues of social unrest and 'community cohesion' (Cohen, 2003).

Due to what was perceived as abuse of the asylum system (Home Office, 1998) measures were introduced in order to attain greater governmental control over the immigration system in the UK. Extensive reform was introduced in 1999 and again in 2002, with further reform planned for 2004. Reform has included the 'streamlining' of the judicial procedure involved in asylum applications, the creation of a centralised agency called the National Asylum Support Service (NASS), the introduction of a dedicated and specialised benefits system for asylum seekers and the dispersal of asylum seekers throughout the UK to accommodation provided by local authorities and private landlords in all regions (Robinson et al., 2003).

As a result of the regionalisation of asylum support, brought about by the introduction of a formal dispersal system, a number of regional consortia were established throughout the UK in order to co-ordinate the asylum support in their respective regions. With a major role of each regional consortia being the co-ordination of the asylum provision outlined by the Home Office between the local authorities and other voluntary stakeholders in their local areas (Yorkshire and Humberside Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees, 2003).

Certain professionals based within various housing departments and social service departments in local authorities have encountered and worked with asylum seekers for a number of years (Sales and Hek, 2004). However, since the introduction of the Asylum and Immigration Act in 1999 there have been teams based within local authorities across the UK, attached to their regional consortium, contracted to the Home Office to 'support' asylum seekers accommodated in their areas. The staff that formed these asylum support teams were drawn, at least initially, from a number of stereotypically 'caring' backgrounds including social work, housing support, education support and social care. These professionals who were experienced in operating within a field of 'support' and 'care' with children, the elderly, young people, drug users and homeless people, entered into a position with a client group that was arguably subject to a high level of 'control' and political tension by legislation and policy (Sales and Hek, 2004). It is however, recognised that many, if not all, areas of social care experience 'control' in one form or another (Parton, 1996), and have to deal with 'caring' for their client group at the same time as adhering to national policy and legislation which may have overarching notions of 'control'. However, Sales and Hek (2004) argue that recent developments in immigration policy have heightened the tension that exists around asylum and in particular heightened the tension that exists between these notions of 'care' and 'control' in working with asylum seekers.

Polyphonic Service Provision of Asylum Support

The analysis in this chapter draws upon the accounts provided by members of local authority asylum support teams in one of the regions of the UK. Individuals from a managerial and a service delivery role participated in interviews that sought to explore the range and context of local asylum support service provision.

From the outset of the research the main focus of these interviews was to explore the concepts of 'acculturation' (Berry, 1997; Bhatia and Ram, 2002a) and 'community cohesion' (Cantle et al., 2002). The accounts of service providers were to be explored and related to the accounts given by asylum seekers during a later narrative interview phase. However, one of the aspects that appeared to dominate the accounts provided by professionals was the inter-connection between the two themes of 'care' and 'control', or what was more commonly referred to in these interviews as 'support' and 'control'. In a recent publication Sales and Hek (2004) have discussed the 'balancing' that social workers and asylum professionals have to do between these two concepts in order to find some kind of position to work from in their professional practice with asylum seekers. Although this conflict is what I was expecting to find, what actually appeared from this analysis was something subtly different.

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Sales and Hek (2004) in their research with an asylum team based in a London borough emphasise what they understand as a tension between the two concepts of 'care' and 'control' and describe the 'balancing' between these that such professionals have to do as representing a 'substantial barrier to good professional practice' (p.60). Thompson (2000) supports this assertion and adds that these professionals based in such roles are ill-equipped to deal with the 'complexities of being caught in the middle' (p.61). Sales and Hek (2004) report that many of the professionals interviewed in their research became uncomfortable with what was seen as the inquisitorial role that was seen to be required of them when dealing with asylum seekers. Such a role was perceived by these professionals as a 'gatekeeping' task rather than one of social work.

Drawing upon the ideas of Bhatia and Ram (2001b) and Hermans and Kempen (1998), I began to realise that it was possible to apply the thinking of Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) around dialogism to the accounts provided by the asylum support professionals. Where, rather than the professionals being caught in a conflicting role, as suggested by Sales and Hek (2004) between the discourses of control, care, community and support, it became possible to see the professionals performing their roles within what Bakhtin (1984) refers to as 'polyphony'. The idea of 'polyphony' is one which independent but interconnected voices can be seen as synonymous with the music formed by an orchestra where many different instruments perform their part in a given musical piece (Fowler, 1993). By taking these ideas and applying them to concepts of self, Bakhtin argues that the self can not be said to be produced and authored by one single voice. Instead, the self emerges during the process of interaction between a number of 'authoritative' and 'internally persuasive' discourses (Bakhtin, 1981; Horrocks et al., 2004). In contrast to a position of 'monovocality' where individuals experience dilemmas between two or more balanced 'pressures', conceptualising the self as polyphonic engaged in the making and re-making of understandings within and between discourse and dialogue allows the professionals in these accounts to be seen as engaged in a process of negotiation between a number of equal discourses that operate simultaneously. As Vice (1997) states, the key to polyphony and the understanding of 'multivoicedness' is the appreciation of this equality, this equality therefore is the underlying presence during the act of negotiation rather than that of tension and conflict.

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> [Bakhtin] argues that here the character and narrator exist on the same plane, the latter does not take precedence over the former but has equal right to speak. The polyphonic novel is a democratic one, in which equality of utterance is central.
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> (Vice, 1997, p.112)

Therefore, the professionals in this research for example, can be understood as both controlling the lives of asylum seekers whilst simultaneously attempting to encourage them to integrate into the community. In addition, they are required to control the movements of asylum seekers by regular checks on the accommodation whilst simultaneously encouraging independence and promoting a non-discriminatory support service. The authoritative discourses of 'control' transmitted by governmental legislation and policy can be seen to interact with the internally persuasive discourses of care, support and integration derived from the professional background of each individual. However, Bakhtin asserts that these 'internally persuasive' discourses were at one time, in the professional experience of each worker 'authoritative' discourses transmitted by their social or housing care background. In this way an individual is seen as a dynamic produced engaged as Horrocks et al. (2004) claim in an 'ongoing exchange'. When placed with the theory of dialogism each individual is constantly and actively engaged in processes of negotiation and reconstruction as they attempt to make sense of their 'self' and experience by drawing upon the available 'authoritative' and 'internally persuasive' discourses.

Analysis of 'Support' in Asylum Service Provision

In order to attempt to highlight the dialogical position in the accounts of asylum support professionals I will concentrate upon the varying notion of 'support' and its narration by the professionals in the asylum teams.

The notion of supporting asylum seekers is pervasive throughout both policy and practical constructions of local authority asylum teams. The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) was constructed to 'support' asylum seekers. Many of the local authority teams involved in the research are entitled 'Asylum Support Teams', many workers are called 'support workers'. However, it appeared during the analysis of the interviews that support was being used to narrate, an array of disparate acts and concepts for those interviewed. In particular, there are at least three ways in which support is entered into, which operate simultaneously, that I wish to draw upon.

The first looks at the understanding that the support provided to asylum seekers could actually serve the purpose of controlling these individuals and looks at the way in which professionals negotiate this role. The second looks at how professionals negotiate a commitment to help and enable the integration of individuals. The third aspect looks at the way in which professionals utilise

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their position in order to attempt to enhance the 'community support' of asylum seekers by attempting to legitimise the acceptance of asylum seekers and refugees in order to ease 'community relations'.

'Support' as Control

The influence that the national asylum support policy had on the asylum managers was prevalent in the interviews when they discussed some of the different 'pressures' that they felt acted upon their 'supporting' role. Many of the managers, because of their background in social care settings gave an account where they narrated their professional experience as being grounded in a role of being 'caring' and 'supporting' by their professional training. Often for these individuals the asylum seeker becomes an individual who has needs that must be identified, interventions that must be available and delivered, and outcomes that need to be monitored in order to provide further suitable support.

There is awareness however, of the interaction between these 'internally persuasive' notions of 'care' and 'support' with the authoritative discourses of 'control' and 'support'. Support here seemingly becomes a discourse entered into at both an authoritative and an internally persuasive level. As a result, in the accounts of the professionals there seems a realisation that when they were formed as 'support teams' inextricably linked to notions to providing this support is the way that this same support actually serves as a method of controlling the lives of those asylum seekers the local authority accommodates. As Louise describes:

> … I mean I suppose we've got that conflict 'ant we between control and support and control which is a conflict which you've got in any legislation …

The awareness is that although much of the asylum legislation is narrated in terms of support the implication is that this develops and extends governmental (central and local) control over the kind of services being accessed, the location of housing and the kinds of needs that are met. Here we see an interesting negotiation on behalf of the asylum team professionals as they accommodate both the existing authoritative discourses of 'control' and 'support' and the internally persuasive ones of 'caring' and 'supporting'. There is an acknowledgement that the interaction between the authoritative and internally persuasive instigates a negotiation on behalf of the workers attempting to understand this notion of 'support' and what their roles mean, as Louise explains:

> [workers] struggle with that when you are trying to support them between having to report certain things because that's a duty that we've got under the contract and on the other hand wanting to help people as much as possible.

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Although for the workers the control involved in managing client files is related to managing the contract that the local authority has with NASS, this ultimately means that the worker has to manage to some extent the asylum seekers life. Support workers therefore become responsible for their client list and possibly culpable for their clients' 'deviant' actions. 'Support' can be withdrawn from an individual asylum seeker if they are found to be breaching terms of their support agreement, such breaches would include, for instance, staying out of their accommodation more nights than they are allowed and/or not signing their attendance at certain centres they attend. Therefore, as well as visiting the asylum seekers' to identify and monitor needs and behaviours in order to enhance well-being, such visits are made with the additional aim of controlling the behaviour and actions that threaten to breach the NASS contract. Although the analysis of Sales and Hek (2004) highlights the problematic nature of this agenda which ultimately causes tension for the professional, the accounts in this research appear to suggest that workers are seemingly able to negotiate between their required roles.

One professional, Susan, acknowledges this possible contradiction and talks to me about her attempts to help her workers mediate these roles. She tells me that she attempts to try and make the visits that the team has to do, as required by the contract with the Home Office, an opportunity for her team members' to 'support' their clients in their lives.

> … its to meet the terms of the contract without making it seem as though we're policing them. Cause you can do an awful lot subtly so its not about tricking people but its about we have to visit you once a month but we'll try and make that as a positive experience as we can.

Dilemmas of 'Support' and Integration

A further example of the polyphonic nature of the asylum team professionals was highlighted by stories of attempts to encourage independence in asylum seekers. Here is an interesting interaction and negotiation between the authoritative and internally persuasive discourses of 'control', 'support', 'independence' and 'dependency'. Asylum seekers were storied in the accounts provided during the research interviews as being predisposed to being dependent upon the asylum team when dispersed to their respective areas within the region; this dependency was something that the professionals talked about trying to reduce. However, in order to meet the aims of the contract with NASS it was seen that certain steps have to be taken in order to maintain some control over the asylum seeker they are accommodating. As a result, professionals use the support they provide as a method of 'keeping in touch' and thus require the encouragement of a continued liaison between the asylum seeker and the asylum team. However, any continued liaison and reliance is

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narrated in the interviews as dependency and something, which needs to be avoided at all costs, and the 'development of independent living skills' encouraged. As Claire narrates here:

> The most important thing is in our work is to assist them to start getting independent … we will do things like take them to first appointments so that they're adapting all the time and some take more than others … so it's like at the same time you're a friendly face but all the time your gradually pushing 'em away and its sometimes quite upsetting when they don't need you anymore

Encouraging the independence of asylum seekers is a concept that does not sit easily with the authoritative discourse on the control of asylum seekers. Such independence signifies self-reliance, freedom and choice which are options that according to Dummett (2001) require to be 'controlled', and hidden from voters because of economic, security and 'community' unrest.

Asylum seekers therefore are entered into at least two roles by this narration; firstly a dependent role of informing the asylum team about what they are doing and where they are going, and secondly they are also encouraged to be an independent person with individual needs. Such a position could be said to place the asylum seeker *both* in a position of being 'in between' identities (Bhabha, 1994), within neither independent nor controlled roles, *and* requiring a performance of 'multi-voicedness' where they negotiate between the authoritative discourses in order to be seen as an independent and ultimately 'successful' but dependent and 'well-behaved' asylum seeker.

Encouraging Acceptance into Local 'Communities'

One of the key recommendations highlighted by a recent review of the dispersal policy, was the need to 'relegitimise' asylum seeking by delineating stereotypes and other forms of migration from people fleeing persecution (Robinson et al., 2003). Also, in order to ease their acceptance in their local areas there is a need to promote the positive contributions that asylum seekers can bring to the UK. In doing so the claim is that by emphasising the 'right' to asylum and countering notions of 'bogus' asylum seeking and the 'burden' of asylum seekers re-establishes asylum seeking as a legitimate migration channel (Robinson et al., 2003).

Although many of the professionals were actually involved in presentations to various groups in the local 'communities' (which incidentally was a further interpretation of their role) professionals found that relegitimising asylum from this position by emphasising such things as 'human rights' very difficult. However, presenting and emphasising the positive contributions that asylum seekers can bring was something that certain professionals found helpful in order to encourage the acceptance of asylum seekers. When asked

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about what the future might pose for their local area, Paul talked to me about how he saw asylum seekers as actually posing 'huge benefits' to the local area in terms of regeneration. Drawing upon the authoritative discourses transmitted by immigration policies that call for skilled workers in order to support a growing economy, Paul described how he saw improvements in cultural diversity, employment (filling skill shortages), and maintaining housing stock by having asylum seekers live in the local area.

> There are some projections about the future of housing in (local area) you know the there will be less economically active house holds because they will be ageing you know more ageing houses difficult to maintain and all that so having people people in with larger families that are economically active is very good

Louise however, takes this one step further in her account and talks to me about how she is encouraging her team to actively promote the diversity that asylum seekers can bring to their local area.

> Well they are obviously bringing a diversity in culture aren't they? … I think that's something that can be very positive for [the local area] … and that's something that we're sort of trying to promote all the time really … people are not only bringing in their own cultures but their bringing in their own skills.

As a result, what appears is that in drawing upon the authoritative discourses of regeneration and economics the professionals appear to narrate a version of asylum seekers to their local communities that place asylum seekers in the role of being useful to the local area in certain sectors. These stories told by the professionals could be said to help challenge the discourse and narration that positions asylum seekers as 'burdens' (Robinson et al., 2003). However, an interesting interaction occurs between, on the one hand, the authoritative discourse of skill shortages and economics and on the other, the internally persuasive discourses of equality and liberalism. For instance, during the interview Paul draws upon liberal repertoires of human rights and freedom of choice.

> … people are dispersed to us without any choice they're just sent up and we've got to support them I'd like that if people had a choice …

> I know there are reasons why I took this job and a belief in people and human rights …

Here Paul, in his account, attempts to negotiate the interaction that emerges as the authoritative discourse interacts with this internally persuasive discourse of human rights. On the one hand, this could be interpreted as an instance of conflict between two polar opposites that require some kind of 'balancing'. On

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the other, by drawing upon the interaction of authoritative discourses and internally persuasive ones Paul, in particular, appears to have developed a way in which he can try and promote the acceptance of asylum seekers into their respective areas. By storying asylum seekers in this way he may be able to reduce the distance that is perceived exists between asylum seekers and the local 'community', by trying to re-story the 'undeserving' as the 'deserving' of assistance (Sales, 2002; Robinson et al., 2003).

Conclusion

At first glance such contradictions within the support of asylum seekers seem unworkable which may appear to produce a professional that is torn and having to balance a number of roles and pressures, as suggested by Sales and Hek (2004). What appears however, by adopting ideas from dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981; 1984) are workers which are able to negotiate this environment by being both one thing whilst *simultaneously* being another. It could be argued that the individuals in the accounts presented are not simply narrating a 'monovocal' self who is either a carer or a controller of individuals. Rather, the professionals realise the apparently contradictory role that they are situated within. As such, professionals can be seen to negotiate a number of roles at the same time. Professionals appear to be able to respond under the multiplicity of pressures upon them, by drawing upon a number of authoritative discourses and internally persuasive discourses equally and *simultaneously* in order to act most appropriately. By conceptualising these professionals as performing these roles *simultaneously* it is useful to draw upon ideas of polyphony proposed by Bakhtin (1984). In this way professionals perform their daily tasks not from a position of either/or, but both/and, where they are able to work with *both* the pressures on them to 'control' asylum seekers *and 'support' and* help them 'integrate' in to the local communities in which they reside.

Acknowledgements

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