**Utopian Community Football? Sport, hope and belongingness in the lives of refugees and asylum seekers**

Refugees and asylum seekers have become increasingly demonised as part of anti-migrant sentiment leading to social exclusion. Sport has been utilised as a tool for social cohesion though evidence as to its efficacy in such a task is limited. Based on a three year research programme exploring the role of football in the lives of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK, this paper examines the concept of belonging, provides evidence for the role of community based sport in social development and concludes with a call for practitioners to maximise their belief in concrete utopian ideals without losing the inherent critical approach needed to positively develop the industry in which they work.

Keywords: Asylum Seekers; Belonging; Football (Soccer); Hope; Lefebvre; Refugees;

***Introduction***

“Provision of leisure opportunities, facilities, time and so on has related to a hope that it will fulfil desire (intentions) for something else, something better, different or just more – or less. For both those needing leisure in times of little respite from hard and dirty work to the providers and visionaries who sought a case for leisure, the idea of leisure mingled with hope: hope that its availability will help people in need, [and] deliver happier, or at least somewhat contented living.” (Crouch, 2014; online)

In his recent study of sport for development programmes in the ‘global south’, Coalter (2013) concludes that ‘hope is not a plan’. This explicitly stated position emerges from his sceptical approach to the grandiose claims made by many programmes as well as the legitimacy given to them by academically endorsed evaluations. It is against this warning that the following paper sets out to explore the role of sport, as a development tool and an informal recreational leisure activity, in the lives of refugees and asylum seekers who manage to escape the problems associated with the nations from which they are forced to leave out of fear for their wellbeing, whether that be as a result of widespread conflict or more personalised human rights violations, to become residents of the UK.

The particular problematic being explored is the notion that sport can have a positive impact on feelings of belonging for people trying to identify with a new society, fit into an unfamiliar community and cope with a negatively conceived social category. It attempts to build upon the excellent studies undertaken in Australia (e.g. Spaaij, 2015; Walseth, 2006) by relocating the basis of such work to the British situation. It also extends Lewis’s (2010) discussion of refugee community events as ‘momentary spaces of belonging’ by applying Lefebvre’s (2002[1961]) notion of ‘the moment’ to the sporting spaces that emerge around participation in recreational football. Finally, in response to Coalter’s (2013) scepticism, it suggests an appropriate place for hope as a sociological category within community sport development through the explication of Utopian theoretical thought.

It is based upon research conducted by a community sport engagement organisation located in South Yorkshire that explored the role football plays in the processes of belonging for refugees and asylum seekers in Britain (Author A, 2013). The project used an ethnographic based approach supported by semi-structured group and individual interviews with more than 50 refugees and asylum seekers living in South Yorkshire – a faction of society for whom, as the result of forced migration, ‘hope’ is not so much a plan as a driving force and way of life and for whom leisure is a contested category but may well contribute to more contented living (Amara, et al, 2005; Rutter et al, 2007). With respect to the subject of this paper, football, in particular, is an ordinary and routine part of many people’s everyday lives (Author B, 2007) but access to which for asylum seekers can be a far less mundane task. This is key to understanding the relationship between leisure, hope and belonging.

The city of Sheffield in which the majority of the fieldwork was conducted is located in a fairly central location within the UK, relatively distant from the port of Dover (240 miles) on the south coast and Heathrow Airport (180 miles), the two primary destinations through which refugees enter the country. The city is home to a significant number of ethnic minority communities[[1]](#footnote-1) and has a long history of offering a welcome to refugees (Darling, 2009). Sheffield gave birth to the City of Sanctuary movement in 2006 and consequently is home to a number of support agencies and networks that have been vital following the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 and the associated asylum dispersal policy. It was also one of the initial places in Britain for refugees to be resettled as part of the Gateway Protection Programme.

Research was conducted over a three-year period through attendance at regular events and activities aimed at refugees and asylum seekers in the city, in an attempt to ‘decentre’ sport within the research process (Crabbe, 2000; Coalter, 2007). In other words, the study was carried out with a recognition that, “…sports [are] sites for socialisation experiences, not causes of socialisation outcomes,” (Coakley, 2004:99) and that the role of football must be contextualised through personal biographies in relation to the current lifeworld in which individuals find themselves. Thus, for some football was a central point through which they connected with the research but for others football emerged through the course of building connections via other activities. It was participants from the latter category that would have been missed had the research ‘centred’ on football throughout.

This ‘grounded approach’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) meant that participants were recruited via their existing connectivity with organisations that work with refugees and asylum seekers, as well as individuals already engaged with the case study organisation’s work. The limitations of this are that those involved cover a vast range of individual positions within the definitional spectrum covering the status of forced migrants as well as cultural and demographic differences. The three year research time frame afforded the researcher the privilege of becoming embedded within the field in the classical anthropological tradition (Geertz, 1973). In doing so, the barriers imposed by limited English language amongst many refugees were able to be overcome in a number of ways[[2]](#footnote-2).

Added to this was a participatory action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) approach to undertaking the investigation that returned specific practical outcomes that emerged as a consequence of the continuing research programme. So, whilst the research initially attempted to ‘decentre’ sport, it also relied on ‘re-centring’ it in order to maintain a common research focus that could potentially have been lost due to working with such a diverse and self-defining group. In other words, particular sites were seized upon to create socialisation experiences in order to explore what the outcomes might be. This was done in consultation with participants themselves and representatives of support agencies who had been engaged with the ‘field’ for much longer than the research programme could ever have provided. This supplemented existing sporting activities with which participants were already engaged prior to the commencement of the research. One such opportunity was the creation of a weekly recreational football session targeted at asylum seekers of all abilities and which forms the focus for this paper.

For the sake of clarity and consistency the best way to categorise the research participants is that they were all male, aged between 18-52 (the majority being in their twenties), had lived in the UK for between three months and ten years and were either asylum seekers, refugees or former refugees who now had British citizenship (the focus of this paper being research participants that were still classified as asylum seekers). Such distinctions are extremely important but can also be detrimental to the research process if used as a starting point for categorising individual participants (Kovacs, 2015). With respect to Yuval-Davis’s (2011) critical considerations of intersectionality in the politics of belonging, specific cultural or demographic characteristics are made clear when contextually necessary within the main body of this paper. Of particular importance is the distinction between the political status imposed on various categories of refugee as well as discourses surrounding such identities. The next section provides context for this but in stark terms, asylum seekers receive limited support until a decision on their case is made, making participation in many activities that others take for granted, such as football, extremely difficult. If given sanctuary as a refugee they are allowed to work and theoretically engage in public life the same as any British citizen, though in reality their discursive positions within the ‘hierarchies of belonging’ (Back *et al*, 2012) restrict such freedoms. If refused they may, through no fault of their own, stay in the system for many years with no formal financial support, relying only on charity to survive.

The research findings presented in this paper and the consequent conclusions reflect the embedded nature of ethnographic methodological processes. The descriptive account invites the reader into the cultural milieu of the ‘Belonging Group’ before providing a voice for participants to express what the sessions mean to them. In analysing the vast amount of information that such fieldwork provides, it is important to realise that quotes are supporting evidence for reflexively monitored, subjectively interpreted and mutually experienced understandings of how the group developed and how I became increasingly acquainted with those involved through participation in the sessions myself, as a social researcher, alongside wider ethnographic activity and theoretical engagement with the subject[[3]](#footnote-3). Before presenting this, however, it is important to contextualise the position of refugees and asylum seekers in current socio-political discourse and how the notion of belonging might be conceived.

*The immigration and integration debates*

Local, national and European elections over the last few years have shown immigration remains a primary issue in current political debate. It is regularly cited as one of the ‘most important issues’ in polling surveys (Blinder, 2012) and played an important part in the vote by Britain to leave the European Union in the 2016 referendum (Ipsos-Mori, 2016). Media scaremongering and political confusion since the turn of the millennium have contributed to a conflation of issues concerning changes in certain migratory patterns to the UK (Spencer, 2011; Hargrave, 2014; Berry *et al*, 2015). Not least is the shift in attitudes towards asylum seekers and the rise of their presence within popular discourse (Macdonald and Billings, 2007). This extremely small, in relative terms, minority of individuals have become the ‘folk devils’ (Cohen, 1972) of the millennial turn.

As a legacy of decades worth of British assistance given to those fleeing from danger, attitudes towards refugees allegedly remain positive (Hargrave, 2014) but increasingly restrictive legislation during the 1990s, culminating in the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, allied with a negative popular media portrayal and inflammatory or dehumanising language from mainstream politicians, prompted a change in the perception of those seeking asylum (Berry *et al*, 2015). Within the popular consciousness, the idea of the ‘refugee’ was replaced by a construction of the ‘asylum seeker’ as a character that was somehow less worthy (Spencer, 2011).

It is against this background that The Commission for Integration and Cohesion (2007) recommended that more needed to be done in welcoming and integrating new migrants. The report identified a number of gaps within local and national government policy for both migrants and settled communities in making the adjustment. The Department of Communities and Local Government (2009) recommended sport as a possible source of social integration.

The integrative power of sport is an oft-cited perspective, particularly by the ‘sporting evangelists’ to which Coalter (2013) refers. He suggests that it is mythopeically seen as a (utopian) tool for development in supposedly providing anything from improved self-efficacy to a solution for world peace. Research has begun to critically challenge these assumptions (Coalter, 2007; Long & Sanderson, 2001; Tacon, 2007) but for successive UK governments sport has retained its pre-eminence as a tool for aiding social cohesion.

Difficulties lie in the meaning and dynamic nature of how the concepts of social cohesion, inclusion and integration are theoretically and practically mobilised for the benefit of a more cohesive social world. For Spencer (2011), social integration, “understood as the situation in which settling persons can participate fully in the economic, social, cultural and political life of a society, while also being able to retain their own identity” (Vallonen, 2008: 42) often comes to mean assimilation, whereby migrants are expected to become culturally similar to the host population (Brubaker, 2001). Moreover, in the case of asylum seekers, their integration is arguably impossible if we use Vallonen’s definition due to the restrictions on work and the consequent lack of economic participation available to them.

In trying to circumnavigate the semantic, political and practical consequences of such terminology, there has emerged in policy documents and academic discourse a more descriptive and seemingly more familiar expression of connectivity through the concept of ‘belonging’ – a performative state brought into being by more reflexive concerns relating to the production of difference and self-conscious identity construction (Giddens, 1991; Bell, 1999; Bauman, 2000).

*Belonging in Britain at the beginning of the 21st Century*

The notion of ‘belonging’ is, similarly to the idea of ‘community’ or ‘home’, an elusive ideal that can mean different things to different people at different times of their lives (see Bauman, 2001; Mallett, 2004). We all ‘know’ what these terms mean but for analytical purposes there is no clear definition. Furthermore, meanings become conflated and interchangeable within the complexities of people’s everyday lives and within political agendas.

At the heart of any discussion of belonging, particularly with regard to new migrants, is that related to the nation-state and the idea of citizenship (Yuval-Davis, 2011). This is, after all, how belonging is legitimated in the legal sense and civil, political and social rights or obligations are democratically conveyed. In contrast (though also inherently linked to this) are personal feelings of belonging that emerge through the activities undertaken and the interpersonal relationships that are formed in our on-going daily lives (Ager & Strang, 2004; 2008; Strang & Ager, 2010).

Without wanting to diminish the importance of official recognition of individuals as citizens and the increased sense of worth that that inevitably brings, my interest in this paper are those aspects of belonging that transcend the legalities of British citizenship and are created through the activities undertaken and bonds formed during the course of daily life. Whilst it may be true that arguably the central certification of belonging is citizenship, as Dummett (2001) suggests it is ultimately decided by whether an individual *feels* that they fully belong. There are plenty of people classed as citizens of a particular nation who do not necessarily have such feelings. There are also those who do not officially ‘belong’ to the nation-state in which they are living but for whom there is some sense of belonging within its borders.

Citizenship is about both belonging to an imagined community (Anderson, 1983) and the conveyance of a political status. At a more local level, belonging to a particular group or community can be about the advantages gained through the acquisition of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), as well as disadvantages based upon prejudices and the relative position of any group within the social structure (Back et al, 2012). More abstractly, and crucial to the proceeding discussion, ‘belonging’ (as opposed to ‘belonging to’) is experienced as an embodied sense of control, comfort and security; the ease through which one can convey both socially constructed and self conceived identities. At the level of everyday life it is the practicalities of being able to perform all variety of actions in as undemanding a way as possible without conscious reflection (Goffman, 1959; Garfinkel, 1967; Giddens, 1990).

The key elements in the on-going production of a relatively consistent everyday realm are summarised by Skey (2011: 148) as shared knowledge/assumptions expressed through language and social practice, spatial limits, temporal regularities and institutional settings. He suggests that:

“Established national frameworks, which are (re)produced through ordered continuities of language, habit, symbols and the material environment, continue to be a crucial element in sustaining a stable sense of self, maintaining trust in daily interactions with other people and social institutions, and familiarising the social settings and landscapes that allow certain groups to feel ‘at home’.”

As mentioned already, ‘home’, as a metaphor for ‘belonging’, is an elusive ideal. It is a desire encompassing cultural norms and individual fantasies (Mallett, 2004).

In this paper belonging, or the absence thereof, is regarded as the interconnection of personal identity, group attachment and cultural background. These characteristics are by no means independent from one another but emerge at different times to greater or lesser degrees to create feelings of belonging within individuals. Thus it is not a fixed state but an ideal towards which each and every one of us proceeds, some more successfully than others (Antonsich, 2010; Krzyzanowski & Wodak, 2011). As Bell (1999:3) puts it, ”…one does not simply or ontologically ‘belong’ to the world or to any group within it. Belonging is an achievement at several levels of abstraction.”

***The Belonging Group***

It has been a long winter, especially for many asylum seekers who are much more used to sunnier climes and whose daily lives offer little motivation to leave the relative warmth of the simple accommodation they have been given. Nonetheless, at 10 o’clock on a cold Wednesday morning, David braves the near freezing conditions and trudges down to the MyPlace Centre. He is quiet, self absorbed, concerned with his own private thoughts. His future in this country is unsure. One of the many whose initial claim for asylum was refused, his mind is filled with the preoccupations of appealing this decision and his bag filled with the documentation needed to do so.

Approaching the football pitches, his mood lightens. He receives shouts of acknowledgement from the couple of young men already kicking a ball to one another, they themselves having been in a similar situation the previous year. He greets his friend, Raffi, with a smile. As they both warm themselves with a steaming cup of tea, kindly provided by a member of the staff team, they discuss the form of Lionel Messi…

From the football pitch outside can be heard shouts of anguish as balls rattle the fencing behind the goal; another shot taken in anger sailing wide of its target as a week’s worth of suppressed frustration is given physical form. Curses in Arabic combine with a surprisingly good knowledge of more familiar four-letter words. Instructions are given in broken English as the group of young men, now numbering a dozen or so, try to organise themselves into two teams. A school playground of multi-national adults do their best to be on the side with better players, dragging their friends and fellow countrymen with them.

Having found some suitable footwear, David emerges from the changing room and jogs a little ungainly onto the pitch. He is not a naturally gifted footballer, but shows some deft touches nonetheless and enthusiastically takes players on when he receives the ball before running straight into a defender with better tactical appreciation of the game. A few groans from his team-mates are shrugged off as he turns to try to reclaim the ball and his lesser ability is soon forgotten as the ball rebounds into his path and he finds the perfect pass to the feet of a talented player they call ‘Ronaldo’.

As the ball hits the back of the net, he turns, a broad smile on his face, fists clenched by his side. More overstated celebrations echo through the cold air from his team mates whilst some of their opponents vociferously argue about who is to blame, a ritual performed by all conceding teams at whatever level the game is played. Their frustrations soon give way to more concerted efforts at not suffering further embarrassment.

After the game, David is again quiet and contemplative as he sits in the changing rooms waiting for a shower to become free so he can have a good wash and warm himself up. That is his choice. The other players are full of energetic verbal exchanges as they discuss who was at fault for which goal and compliment one another’s abilities. The discussions continue over lunch before many of them head off to the ‘drop-in’ at which advice will be sought about any number of issues concerning their welfare. For now, though, there is a good spirit and the jocular arguments prevail.

Donnelly and Coakley (2002), note that a benefit of sport and recreation is the creation of safe spaces that can create a feeling of affiliation and sense of belonging. As part of a participatory action research approach during the period of investigation, the case study organisation, responded to the need for a regular informal football session that would benefit individual asylum seekers with little support and a desire to be more active. Emerging from the title of the project, ‘The Belonging Group’, became a regular feature of the organisation’s community engagement work and persists beyond the period of research (and the financial benefits it afforded) due to the desire of participants to take ownership of the sessions themselves. Initially referred to by staff as a session for refugees and asylum seekers, the identifying label of the group itself emerged from members ‘seeking’ (Yuval-Davis, 2011) to avoid a perceived negative categorisation even within multi-cultural minority spaces and thus potentially elevating themselves from the base of the new hierarchy of belonging (Back *et al*, 2012).

A strong sense of belonging was nurtured within the group due to a combination of factors: welcoming environment[[4]](#footnote-4), organisational support[[5]](#footnote-5), organic group development based upon informal and democratic decision making within the group[[6]](#footnote-6), a focus on playing football for the sake of it, and an implicit knowledge that others are, have been or possibly will be facing similar problems with regard to their situation. One of the important things though is that this is not explicitly discussed:

“Every one of us is carrying different experiences of life but most of all what connects us is football… It is very rare when we sit [after] we’ve played football [that] we talk about what’s happening in our lives and our private things… At the moment, mainly we talk about what happened on the pitch.” (Somali asylum seeker)

And what happens on the pitch contains its own narrative on which to concentrate both physical and mental energy. It is a distraction from more pressing concerns. As one participant noted:

“All I was thinking about was, ‘How can we be losing [the match]…?’” (Zimbabwean asylum seeker)

This extends into daily life more widely as the weekly sessions act as a source of anticipation:

“The night, maybe two or three nights, before I play football I get very excited. Like last night, I [go to] sleep at three o’clock in the morning… because I know [the following day] I go play football.”

(Iranian asylum seeker)

From certain perspectives this may be seen as an illusory way of distracting individuals facing serious threats to their human rights and who are arguably being further persecuted at a point when they were expecting to be able to move on with their lives. Many asylum seekers do try to take up the fight, standing up against what they believe to be an unfair situation. The majority, however, find themselves downtrodden to an extent that their hopes rest with the expertise and persistence of others. For them football is one part of life that for a moment can provide some glory:

“It’s the only way I can win because outside [these sessions], that’s a different story.” (Somali asylum seeker)

Above and beyond these short lived instants, though, other positive activities can be provided that, as participants grow in confidence and build trusting relationships through playing football, offer more meaningful opportunities in terms of challenging the status quo, raising awareness and educating others. In this sense, such football sessions are just a gateway to further engagement.

“Before I got into this programme [at the case study organisation] I had become sort of like a recluse. But after [starting to come regularly]… I’ve started a lot of programmes and I’ve started doing a lot of voluntary work… It just changed me as a person…” (Zimbabwean asylum seeker)

Furthermore, as a group there was a desire to form a team and play more competitively. Opportunities were provided through informal competitions, though there was resistance from some members against the sessions becoming more formalised because many just wanted to play recreationally (rather than spend time on coaching drills to become more competitive in such tournaments). With sessions being part of the organisation’s wider engagement strategy, more competitive or talented players could be directed towards football clubs with an appropriate culture competing in the local amateur league, providing some with a (potentially false) hope for their future:

“[I] can see bright future playing football in this country... in Congo it was difficult to have opportunity which [I’ve] got now to play football.” (Congolese refugee)

Such hopes are not uncommon amongst young men of any background who think they have what it takes to make a career in football. What is important is how such hopes are managed, supported and where necessary tempered by honest appraisal accompanied by practical alternatives.

In summary, feelings of belonging are enhanced through the structured approach of the organisation, voluntary levels of participation and mutual understanding of those involved. Simultaneously, whilst the group all share a common political status, this is not explicit due to the multicultural nature of the organisation allowing individuals to express other aspects of their identities that for a short period can overwhelm the affective dominance of labels associated with forced migration. There are emotional benefits that extend into the past and future as the embodied moments are reflected upon and positively anticipated between sessions, as well as a hope that participation may lead to personal growth both in football terms and through wider social benefits. Sessions are interwoven into the living of daily life; a stopping off point for David on his way to speak to his solicitor or an enjoyable social activity that offers continuity from one week to the next and thus structure to lives lacking routine. This is no different to how others incorporate football as part of their daily lives, in between other responsibilities or as a focal point for social interaction (Author B, 2017).

If planned with appropriate involvement from participants and strong structural support, a critical aspect of sport for development is the role of hope in linking the past, present and future through an everyday, pre-reflective association with a familiar activity. Belongingness is heightened at the moment of participation but through repetitivity and the emotional, social and physical investment attached to participation, their involvement becomes an ‘ordered continuity’ (Skey, 2011) that challenges dominant feelings of being unwelcome which may emerge at other times due to cultural unfamiliarity, personal resentment or structural demonisation. Key to this, however, is time. ‘Ordered continuities’ are defined by duration (and durability). The length can be reduced through providing appropriate structures but as will be explained it relies on giving people hope, acting on what is hoped for (no matter how small or how successful it may prove to be) and most importantly providing the regular opportunity for people to connect together the moments of action as part of the mundanity of their daily lives.

*Hope, Utopianism and Everyday Life*

It is important to place Coalter’s (2013) conclusion from which I started this paper in context of his wider thesis. Hope is not a plan when it is solely the result of wishful thinking; when it is based upon unfounded assumptions about the efficacy of sport as a developmental tool. There is a difference when hope is the result of, rather than the basis for, development – when hope is based on setting seemingly achievable goals in the realisation of wider objectives; in other words hope needs a plan. What must be recognised is that hope can be effective even when the probability of such a plan succeeding is remote. That is not to say that it should replace the importance of challenging the seeming likelihood of failure through effective community action. Furthermore, such hope is not necessarily explicit but is observable over time as individuals offer more of themselves to the social milieu surrounding a particular activity.

In football terms this is illustrated by the hopes expressed by those participating, whether fulfilment of a seemingly undiscovered football talent, developing themselves into a competitive team or simply to make up for the previous week’s poor performance. Allied to this are the hopes of practitioners that participation will achieve wider benefits in terms of positive involvement within wider society and the attached social capital this brings. This may be informally through connections with other players or through the possibility of more formal volunteering opportunities within the organisation. Crucially for asylum seekers, these somewhat small hopes are realistically achievable in comparison to the grand project of reconstructing a former life, negotiating a new identity and becoming content, for the time being, with a new ‘home’. They are also more realistic than the mythopeic aims of sport for development and peace critiqued in Coalter’s work. Crucially, though, such small hopes are necessary in maintaining a belief in the grand project which, in order to be fully viable, relies on ‘concrete’ action in the pursuit of ‘abstract’ ideals (Bloch, 1986[1955]).

Hope is, as Bloch (1986[1955]) would have it, both a matter of theory and practice (Levitas, 1990). Located very much within utopian discourse and its often pejorative associations with ineffective idealism the theoretical practicalities of hope, despite being a fundamental basis for political ideologies rooted in critical socialism or progressive liberalism, arguably have been overwhelmed through consumer led practising of desire and wish fulfilment (Bauman, 2000). Levitas (1990:221) in her seminal text on the concept of utopia states that, “The essential element in utopia is not hope, but desire – the desire for a better way of being.” She notes that what differentiates desire from hope within such utopian thought is the issue of perceived possibility: “Utopia expresses and explores what is desired; under certain conditions it also contains the hope that these desires may be met in reality, rather than merely in fantasy.” So, we can all have a desire for a perfect life of ‘milk and honey’ with little thought of it being such. But within utopian discourse, whilst much might be seen as purposely unrealistic as a critique of both contemporary conditions and the desire for unattainable futures, certain alternative realities can be more practically foreseen and thus planned for. Wishful thinking becomes will-full thinking.

Crouch (2014: online) summarises this with reference to free-time activities as follows:“So much of what leisure is and might be is imbued with hope … hope as celebration, of meeting up, enjoyment, recovery, escape.” He suggests that, “Hope has powered much of leisure’s progress,” but goes on to caution that, “Mere hope can be empty and arid, self deceiving even frustrating.” In summary, it is not ‘good’ *per se*, but it can be. Taking a lead from utopian theory, he highlights that, “Hope can accompany enchantment, and without modes of enchantment we might not have the energy and inspiration to [positively] enact leisure [as a possibility for change].”

Historically and socially located constructions of ideal worlds that offer a better way of being, utopias can function as purely compensatory but can also fuel anticipatory desire; what Bloch (1986[1955]) distinguishes as abstract and concrete utopia. In reality, these distinctions are ideal types that become interwoven through the practices of everyday life providing both compensation for and anticipation of particular material conditions. Thus, in the case of sport, or more specifically football, for the development or realisation of ideals in promoting belongingness amongst refugees and asylum seekers there are conditions that are hoped for with the intention of achieving them and those that are hoped for as an alleviation of more intensely felt trauma.

Both these conditions are present within the dialectical materialism of Lefebvre’s (1988; 2002[1961]) critical utopian analyses of the everyday: “All thinking that has to do with action has a utopian element. Ideas that stimulate action, such as liberty and happiness, must contain a utopian element… [it is] a necessary condition of the project of changing life” (Lefebvre, 1988: 87). His typically elusive brand of philosophical pragmatism, drawing on the work of Marx, Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger (Elden, 2004) offers wide ranging metaphors for attempting to understand and analyse the obliqueness through which our daily lives are lived and the difficulties attached to altering the trajectory of mundanely felt inadequacies and inequalities.

One’s situation is apparent through moments of realisation. Situations (cause) change in moments. Belonging, and all that that entails, is the situation being sought by those subject to forced migration. For Lefebvre, such moments occur in the living of everyday life but are often restricted by the systemic rationalities associated with capitalism. It is his assertion that individual everyday lives are transformed in the act of living everyday life as a revolutionary process when recognised as such. In other words, belonging can be perceived through moments of realisation but are often overwhelmed by their opposite and it is only when such realisation becomes a mundane part of existence that such a change is manifest. This may or may not be consciously acknowledged by those wishing to belong.

Pontificating from within a social environment turbulent with revolution Lefebvre’s theories may seem irrelevant in what might be seen to be more settled social environments. However, they are possibly useful for conceptualising the certainty of uncertainty associated with the everyday experience of belongingness in the lives of refugees and asylum seekers and the difficulty facing community sport practitioners who seek to provide positive experiences for new arrivals whilst operating within the confines of an underfunded and tightly defined creative realm.

***Conclusion: Moments of Belonging and Community Sport Utopianism?***

Coalter (2013) concludes his robust critique of the Sport for Development and Peace sector by stating that, “Hope is not a plan,” and that to leave development to hope and ‘sport’ is a poor strategy. His work targets international development and is an extremely well argued position with which it is difficult to disagree. At risk of being labelled a ‘sporting evangelist’, the evidence in the context of sporting provision aimed at developing communal togetherness and fostering belongingness for new arrivals in this particular case suggests that sport can have an important part to play as part of an overall strategy that addresses other needs.

The hope that sport provides alongside other necessary infrastructural support is a valuable reassurance for the participants of this research who are seeking sanctuary in the UK. It does not challenge key political decisions, provide legal rights associated with citizenship or overcome financial hardship. But it can add to cultural, social and mental welfare making it easier to feel more welcome, access other services and channel frustration in a more constructive manner. It is, though, important to keep levels of hope in check in order to encourage realistic aims without undermining enthusiasm.

“Sport, like most activities, is not a priori good or bad, but has the potential of producing both positive and negative outcomes. Questions like ‘what conditions are necessary for sport to have beneficial outcomes?’ must be asked more often.” (Patriksson, 1995, cited in Coalter, 2013: 43)

It is through repetition and routine from one day to the next that individual lives become structured and manageable, leading to some sense of stability and belongingness (Young, 1997; Chaney, 2002; Skey, 2011). Sports such as football can provide this at a conscious and subconscious level to those who have already gained a disposition towards such activities before arriving in a foreign environment. They provide a pre-reflective base from which to proceed with more demanding aspects of life; an activity that can overwhelm the mind and body such that other concerns can be temporarily ignored. It may be that once other skills and connections have been acquired, such as language or work, sport takes a secondary role. Often, sport simply provides a distraction, a way of avoiding the endless tedium of empty days with little to do as asylum seekers are prevented from (legally) taking an integral role in the local and national economy. The value of this should not be underestimated as it provides a more regular and practically focused sense of anticipation and reflection aside from the more constant background concerns that occupy asylum seekers and refugees about their citizenship status, the situation in their ‘home country’, the whereabouts of their family or their ability to achieve their self-image.

Of course, it is important to acknowledge that football, and sport more widely, does not provide these qualities in isolation. As socio-cultural institutions and practices, sports clubs, recreational sporting activities and sport consumption help to support and are supported by other interactions within our everyday lives (Author B, 2007; 2017). We need to regard ‘sports as *sites* for socialization experiences, not *causes* of socialization outcomes’ (Coakley, 2004; Coalter, 2013). Bearing this in mind, the extent to which sport can fulfil the more politically motivated aspects of belonging must be tied in to, as well as being used to challenge, the structures that govern our daily lives.

The potential for recreational football to develop into the formation of a club that offers more apparent representation for its members within the social (football) structures of the locality is always there but may be hampered by relevant support, financially and structurally. Nonetheless, such opportunities create the possibility for community empowerment through a desire to compete on the same level as the majority (Author A, 2013; Bradbury, 2011; Campbell & Williams, 2015). Empowerment also comes from the enactment of football as a ‘bodily reflexive practice’ (Connell, 1995) that has the potential to provide individual agency within the sporting context. The effects of this more widely are limited by the complexities of social identities that, within popular consciousness, combine prejudices based upon economic migration and racist stereotypes with observable ethnic differences and invisible political categories.

For refugees and asylum seekers whose lives are the very embodiment of change, belonging can be seen much more clearly as a dynamic process. Familiarity with one’s surroundings is a luxury; comfort is achieved through the possibility of permanent residence in a much safer environment. As those possibilities rise and fall with the migration policies of the British Government, any sense of belonging is experienced through momentary connections made at the cultural, communal and personal level. The research shows that football provides numerous ways in which these momentary connections are made. Any sense of belonging relies on the ability to unite these moments together to create the situation described by belongingness. To return to the elusive nature of what belonging represents, it could be that in Lefebvre’s (2002[1961]) sense, belonging itself should be defined as ‘the moment’ in which “something – which is certainly not a thing,” is constituted to be, “both an illusion and a reality” (p342); reflecting Bloch’s utopian ideal (1986[1955]).

In this sense, belonging should be seen as an organic and very individualised feeling that emerges and disappears within the living of everyday life; structurally, however, it is a critique of the rationalised and bureaucratic definition of who is the ‘refugee’, who is the ‘asylum seeker’. The ‘moment’ in Lefebvre’s sense, and in relation to football and belonging, is when instances of acceptance and self-expression coagulate through a physical and mental familiarity of being in the world, the horizon of which is always in the distance but can nonetheless be experienced in relation to non-acceptance and structural oppression present in life more widely. It does not, in the structural sense, overcome the oppression and disparities experienced as a result of being a refugee or an asylum seeker. It can help to manage them in a positive and constructive (developmental) form. It perhaps provides a reversed ‘discongruity of belonging’ described by Rutter *et al* (2007).

Most apparently, sport can provide a temporary substitute for aspects of a previous life that may have been lost or a continuation of one particular aspect that helped define a previously more solid identity. Through repetition it can lead to ordered continuity (in a discontinuous form) at a time of change. It provides a critical disjuncture through which embodied forms of belonging can be exposed. The degree to which such embodied forms can extend to the body politic more widely to create more powerful collective bodies is dependent upon structural support. The extent to which, in Dummett’s (2001) terms, an individual *feels* they belong may not necessarily extend to such concerns.

The question remains, however, as to whether feelings of belonging are necessarily a positive for new migrants. The presence of hope is what drives many asylum seekers to retain a better vision for their future. The possibility of complacency that comes with belongingness is the result of fitting into a (neo-liberal) system that may have the effect of condemning refugees to a future of poverty, both economically and culturally. If, as I have suggested, ‘belonging’ in 21st Century Britain is a performative state brought into being by more reflexive concerns relating to the production of difference and self-conscious identity construction, the desire to belong is inevitably informed by previous cultural experiences alongside dominant Western consumerist ideals. The role of community sport is in balancing the utopian compensatory desire for a different life with the possibility of shaping the realities of everyday lives to be closer to that which is hoped for. Why sport? The nature of sporting competition is attractive to particular individuals who, with the right support, can channel that motivation whilst also benefiting from the very abstract nature of that sporting competition in fulfilling their compensatory desire. It is also a very apparent part of everyday British life that, to a degree, crosses cultural boundaries.

What must be asked is whether community sport has lost its utopian ideals as it becomes increasingly professionalised and whether it’s paternalistic roots really allow for a critique of the system that seems to give with one hand and take with the other? Communities are client bases; community work the production of programmes that fit funding criteria. Funding that is led by seeking out new ways of reaching (creating?) new communities of need. Identifying a problem and an innovative solution within the limited period that the funding remains available. If community sport needs to move beyond sporting evangelism in terms of motivation it needs to retain the utopian form that inspired ‘the providers and visionaries who sought a case for leisure’ and provides hope for an alternative social structure. It also relies on the ‘evangelical’ attitudes allied with healthy scepticism that permeate many community (sport) organisations and the individuals who operate within them.

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1. According to local government figures, approximately 19% of the city’s population are from black and minority ethnic groups. The largest of those groups is the Pakistani community, but Sheffield also has large Caribbean, Indian, Bangladeshi, Somali, Yemeni and Chinese communities (https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/your-city-council/sheffield-profile/population-and-health.html). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Firstly, communication is not confined to perfect spoken language, thus findings that inform this paper stem from the way in which football participation itself can overcome such barriers alongside time spent with participants getting to understand their situations.

   Secondly, when greater clarity is required (in all sorts of situations – not just for the benefit of a social researcher) individuals rely on others with better language skills to interpret for them; hence the value of group interviews (other weaknesses notwithstanding in terms of group dynamics and power relationships between those with stronger and weaker language skills).

   Thirdly, being in the field for such a period of time provides ‘triangulation’ opportunities in the search for greater internal ‘validity’ as research questions can be reframed in different contexts and confirmed through observation and repetition (see Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). This leads to an interpretive account of participants’ hopes and desires for belonging that emerged over time spent in the field and theoretical engagement with the concept. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. When focusing on the subtleties and nuances of how everyday lives become necessarily routine whilst theoretically engaging with the notion of belonging, direct questioning presents limitations due to the pre-reflective nature of the everyday (see Garfinkel, 1967) leaving the researcher to rely on intuitive frameworks that combine ethnographic ‘realities’ with interpretive ‘understandings’ (Blackshaw, 2003).

   I am not claiming an insider perspective or ‘dual consciousness’ with regards to the experience of forced migration, but rather an involved experience of football participation that when reflexively monitored reveals similarities and differences between myself and the various research participants in what is taken for granted as part of an embodied practice in relation to notions of belonging. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The organisation running the sessions is rooted in an anti-racist philosophy, promotes inclusionary practice, is staffed by a multi-cultural team and is located in a building frequented by people from diverse ethnic minority backgrounds. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Support for the sessions included covering travel costs of participants to attend, providing sports kit and footwear to play in, warm showers (as well as towels and toiletries) and the opportunity to sit down and share a good quality meal together afterwards. Support staff and volunteers are experienced in working with minority groups generally, have good conflict resolution skills and knowledge about the asylum system to provide helpful advice to those facing problems and manage tensions that were unable to be resolved within the group. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The group were regularly consulted regarding issues that arose and members encouraged to take on tasks of cooking food, washing kit and organising more competitive matches (with financial support provided where needed). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)