



Being Together: Everyday Geographies and the Quiet Politics of Belonging

Kye Askins¹

Department of Geography
Northumbria University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK
kye.askins@northumbria.ac.uk

Introduction

A number of inter-related issues since the turn of the 21st century have resonated through domestic and foreign policies across the world: ongoing violences and the war on/of terror, various urban ‘racial disturbances’, economic austerity and an increasing hostility to immigrants across Europe. In the UK, this has resulted in both more repressive policies on immigration, and the acceleration of efforts to bring different communities together (Askins and Pain 2011). Among the latter, ‘community cohesion’ has become a central theme for social policy, outlined as the attempt to build communities with a ‘common vision and a sense of belonging’, in which diversity is valued, there are similar life opportunities for all, and positive relationships between people from different backgrounds within neighbourhoods (DCLG 2007). Given that this era is dominated by increasingly diverse migration (ONS 2013), heterogeneity and intercultural encounter is arguably more routine, raising speculation as to whether better appreciation and understanding of difference can move us towards a more ‘cosmopolitan’ society (eg. Simonsen 2008; Valentine 2008). However, such ‘superdiversity’ also has the potential to increase conflict between selves/others, namely, in the UK, between majority white and minority and migrant communities of colour. Back (2007) argues that ‘the immigration line’ has replaced ‘the color line’ as humanity’s key challenge in the 21st century.



Such recent debates around integration and cosmopolitanism have raised questions about the spaces of interaction that may enable meaningful and lasting encounters between different social groups. Increasing attention has been given to the spatialities of interethnic encounters, focusing on how the settings of contact between different groups, as well as their wider political and social contexts, play a key role in the experiences and outcomes of encounter (eg. Nayak 2012; Phillips et al. 2007). At the same time, policy debates around community cohesion have renewed engagement with ‘contact theory’ (Allport 1954), particularly because separation and hostility between existing and newly arrived groups is a key current social and political issue of concern in the UK and elsewhere.

In this intervention, I consider such issues through the lens of an on-going research project with a befriending scheme that brings refugees and asylum seekers (R/AS) together with local residents in an urban area in the north east of England, offering some tentative thoughts around the role of everyday politics and places caught up in the social relations evident in the befriending scheme. I start with a brief outline of the research, before considering the complex geographies of care evident in this befriending scheme, emphasising interconnection and interdependence between individuals. I argue that there is a particular, quiet politics of encounter being enacted, attached to desires to belong in the local area, enabled and mutually co-produced through everyday geographies.

Research context

The research is attempting to understand the practices and conditions that engender and foster positive intercultural social relations, through paying attention to how these are produced through a befriending scheme for R/AS. Research questions are centred around exploring how geographies of encounter and identity are interconnected with issues of migration, mobility, place and belonging, grounded in a body of literature in social geography that considers the complex, shifting, intersectional and contested meanings around place, displacement, migration, group affiliations and so on (see Mee and Wright 2009; Wise and Velayutham 2009; Yuval-Davies et al. 2006). Specifically, much of this is concerned with the racialisation of migration, how marginalized groups are excluded from the public realm, and struggles over citizenship and polity (Staeheli et al. 2009).

The study adopts a participatory approach, the details of which are beyond the scope of this intervention. Such methodology is not unproblematic, given its explicitly political approaches to co-producing research and knowledges, the ethical complexities of working alongside participants, and resurgent imperatives towards academic ‘impact’ and engagement. I can only highlight here the ‘messiness’ of empirical research (see Conlon et al. 2013; Kindon et al. 2007; Cooke and Kothari 2001).

The project is in collaboration with the West End Refugee Service² (WERS), a voluntary organisation in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, which offers structured support to R/AS through its premises in a detached house in a local neighbourhood, including financial support from its hardship fund, advice from support workers around all aspects of claiming asylum and the practicalities of living as a R/AS in the area, emotional support through a trained counsellor, a clothing store and a small social/meeting space (see www.wers.org.uk). WERS also runs a befriending scheme, which is the main focus of the research. R/AS are paired with volunteer befrienders, whose role is to informally support new migrants, however the individuals in any pairing decide. Rather than a ‘mentoring’ relationship, the emphasis is on ‘being together’, and personal relationships are developed through activities in the local area: going for walks, to cafes, being invited to each other’s houses, cooking meals, shopping etc. Such activities relate to geographies of encounter and identity, and are also embedded in notions of care, to which I turn first.

Contested geographies of ‘care’

The concept of charity has been critiqued in debates regarding ‘care’, giving and voluntarism across social sciences literature, unpicking who has the right (and is empowered) to give, and how those constructed as needing care may be reiterated as other and reinscribed as power-less and marginalised (see Barnett and Land 2007; Zizek 2008). As Korf (2007: 370) argues regarding compassion, this kind of care or giving “creates asymmetric relations ... because the giving self feels compassionate, is active, while the receiving other is pitied and thus passive.” Darling (2011: 408) critiques an asylum drop in centre in the UK for precisely such reproduction of social relations aligned with “a politically passive and marginalised vision of the asylum seeker”.

But something else is going on at WERS that challenges such construction of R/AS as powerless in a variety of ways. Not all volunteer befrienders conceptualise their role in the narrow way critiqued in the literature, and it is common for befriendees to welcome befrienders into their homes, and cook for them, reversing the role of giver, or to make the decisions as to when and where meetings occur. Moreover, as relationships develop, individual personalities quickly come to the fore rather than ‘befriender’/‘befriendeed’ roles, and challenge simplistic/asymmetric power relations:

I’m not sure I had any expectations ... I think I tried to avoid this in an attempt to be as open as possible.

I’ve learned that people might want a different kind of support from how I had imagined.

²I name the organisation as they requested I do so, in order to raise awareness of their work; all individuals are anonymised.

Contact remains on Ashook's terms which is fine, if a little frustrating at times.

I have got to know two very interesting and intelligent women and their families, and have felt more strongly than before how interconnected our world is.

Over time, Marla has supported me as much as I have supported her. I really think that there is a strong bond of mutual trust.

(befriender comments)

This is not to say that positions/relations are equal, rather that different agencies ebb and flow across time, and across different spaces of befriending. These relationships instead resonate with a feminist ethic of care, embedded in interconnection and relationality, wherein people support each other. Highlighting issues of interdependency between individuals demands that we pay critical attention to making visible hidden connections between care and power (Bondi 2008). Not least, it is important to consider that WERS' volunteer befrienders are diverse, and include men and women from a range of ages, socio-economic positions and life experiences - including refugees. This complicates any simplistic notion of the 'white, middle class' volunteer who is privileged to give, requiring a careful examination of identity and the politics of encounter.

Self, Other and the politics of encounter

'Living with difference' is central to debates surrounding migration and encounter, whether positive – the benefits of cosmopolitanism - or negative - social and spatial marginalisation (Valentine 2008). This emphasis on difference is critical in examining the material inequities and wider structures of inequality that persist across a range of scales. However, *meaningful* encounters are *also* about how people come to recognise simultaneous similarity, developing new relations that shift pre-existing stereotypes through some appreciation or experience of connection or commonality (Parekh 2000). That is not to flatten out diversity, or collapse into a simplistic universalism, but to hold both 'same' and 'not-same' within notions of identity construction. With regards to community cohesion, a 'transformative politics of encounter' (Askins 2008) incorporates a radical openness to the simultaneity of difference and similarity, to deconstruct dominant discourses that essentialise minorities as only different. This politics crucially must recognise that encounters between different groups can draw upon and reiterate socially constructed difference, but that they also have the *potential to shift* how we see and how we feel about our others.

Such 'transformative politics' are evident in the befriending scheme as relationships evolve, with people crucially recognising the ways in which they are different, *and* developing relationships also through commonalities they share:

I have a clearer understanding of Iranian culture and the political/social situation that prevails there [...] we both enjoy discussing current affairs.

I feel that I've an insight into other cultures and [...] we're learning about each other what we like and don't like and ... turns out we both love reality TV!

Shabna makes me feel so welcome in her house, she is so generous ... it's fascinating to learn about her culture [...] we both love cooking and share recipe ideas.

(befriender comments)

I love watching football and films on TV with Adam ... we support different teams though

When we moved to the area we didn't know anyone, Graham helped us join many activities and get to know the area. We really like going to museums together.

Bill likes walking, I like walking. We go to the parks and the country. Your country is very different to my country but I like it.

(befriender comments)

While it cannot be claimed that all come to the scheme with a radical openness to simultaneity of same/not-same, befriender-befriender relationships clearly shift understandings of Self and Other. This is political, in the broader sense of *politics being the making of relationships between people*: politics should not shut down the potential of/for disagreement (Mouffe 2005), neither is politics only about divergence. The befriending relationships evidence a tension between dis/similarities, always evolving, in which there is potential for divergence, and for consensus. This is also political in that these relationships are about remaking society at the local level: they are not fleeting encounters, where people share public space without necessarily engaging beyond surface level; neither are they prosaic interactions of workplace or education. These social relations are explicit (to which I return later) and – importantly – implicitly intertwined with issues of belonging.

Migration, place and belonging

Probyn (1996) has argued that belonging is 'longing to be', incorporating an emotional dimension that is more than be-ing, but also a yearning for attachments: feeling part of a larger whole, through social, familial, emotional bonds *with others and to place*. There is a long standing body of work examining issues of belonging, identity and space with regards to diaspora, which considers shifting, hybrid and contested meanings around place among migrants (eg. Mee and Wright 2009). Further, there is an emerging literature exploring the emotional imperatives to and experiences of (non)belonging among first, second, third generation immigrants,

and how their (lack of) sense of belonging plays a crucial role in developing social relations in any ‘new place’:

Belonging is a dynamic emotional attachment that relates people to the material and social worlds that they inhabit and experience. It is about feeling ‘at home’ and ‘secure’, but it is equally about being recognised and understood.

(Wood and Waite 2011: 201)

There is much to say about emotions, embodiment and affect through this project, beyond the capacity of this intervention, but I wish to make two key points here. First, befriendees coming to the scheme can be conceived as enacting a desire to belong in Newcastle, rather than ‘asking for help’ from a position of powerlessness, in line with Hyndman’s (2010: 456) call for a feminist geography that uncovers the ways in which individuals named and placed as R/AS move beyond “*performing the script of ‘refugee’*”. Broadly, befriendees indicate a wish to better engage in the local community, and state how important it is for them to ‘have a friend’: it is about feeling a connection to someone in Newcastle, as friends in an interdependent, not dependent, way.

Second, the research suggests that local residents’ desire to belong must be considered *alongside* immigrants’: how befrienders’ understand their selves and place, where and how they feel recognised and understood. Thinking about ‘translocality’ and belonging with regard to R/AS is critical, but we risk constructing R/AS as the only ones who migrate or are trans-placed. Several befrienders (refugees and non-refugees) are/have been mobile, living and working overseas in varying capacities, for varying lengths of time, and discuss wanting to reciprocate the welcome they have received elsewhere in the world. Moreover, many befrienders wish their local community to be open and diverse, in line with the geographies of responsibility that Massey (2004) outlines. Of course, we need to critically consider the privilege of certain mobilities, and the power circulating through and enabling such movements. Critical here is that both befrienders and befriendees desire to belong, and (re)make local place and community in inclusive ways. Such desire, I argue, is *quietly political*, performed through relationships that are enabled by and mutually co-productive of everyday geographies.

Quiet politics and the everyday spaces of (be)friending

Recent work on activism in geography has been unpicking the everyday activities in quotidian spaces which are part of a broader continuum of movements for change, highlighting banal, embodied activities, which Horton and Kraftl (2009) outline as ‘implicit activism’, centred around ‘small acts and kind words’. Relatedly, Staeheli et al. (2012: 630) argue for ‘ordinary citizenship’ as a way to better understand ‘seemingly mundane acts or micropolitics’, and how:

small actions [...] can lead to varied forms of contact and engagement that hold the potential to nudge established patterns of control and authority and to anticipate new political acts.

It is through the everyday spaces in which befriending occurs - in homes, neighbourhoods, cafes, going for walks in the local park, and to local shops - that those more nuanced understandings of difference *and* similarity alluded to earlier are produced. These mundane spaces allow for, and demand, shifts in perceptions of Self and Other, nudging established discourses of alterity, and anticipating new social relations: they are the prosaic places in which people discover each other as multifaceted, complex and interdependent. Yet, while befriending relationships involve small acts, I suggest the concept of 'quiet politics' to reflect the more-than-implicit actions being taken. These relationships are explicit, there is a political *will to engagement* that requires commitment, as mentioned above. Befrienders must apply to become volunteers, be interviewed by WERS' staff, provide a referee, undergo a Criminal Records Bureau check, and attend four training sessions over a four week period; befriendees have to apply to the scheme, complete the necessary forms and have various meetings with WERS staff before a pairing takes place.

What is particularly striking is that, almost without fail, research participants stop talking about befriending, their discourse shifting to 'being friends'. Bowlby's (2011: 612) work on friendship as recognition of communal belonging resonates here, and she draw on the concept of 'co-presence' to discuss the ways in which 'getting together' is:

an opportunity to share the embodied experience of a place or an event - eating out together, going to a film, watching a sporting event, playing a game together - these shared experiences are then used as part of the material through which the friendship is continued.

Further, Bunnell et al. (2012: 492) describe how friendships are enacted through/in everyday spatial practices *and* connect to wider social, cultural and political relations and processes, outlining the importance of friendship as a form of intimacy in increasingly mobile and interconnected geographies. I am mindful here of Atkinson et al.'s (2011) call for greater examination of the connections of care across different spatialities; and to think critically about vulnerability and dependency. Certainly, 'being together'/being friends involves complex, emergent and interdependent geographies of care.

Moving forwards, this research intends to explore the ways in which individual relationships can challenge dominant discourses of difference and exclusion in the region. Matejskova and Leitner (2011) argue that sustained and positive intercultural encounters may occur in neighbourhood community centres, but warn that such shifts in pre-existing (negative) stereotypes did not appear to be 'scaled up' more widely. We cannot assume that meaningful encounters are broadly transformative and decrease interethnic conflict. Thus I echo Bunnell et al.'s (2012) call for closer examination of the geographies of friendship,

specifically interethnic friendships, to further academic and policy debates around community cohesion and integration, in the UK and elsewhere.

References

- Allport, Gordon. 1954. *The nature of prejudice*. New York: Perseus Books.
- Askins, Kye. 2008. Renegotiations: towards a transformative geopolitics of fear and otherness. In, Rachel Pain and Susan Smith, *Fear: Critical Geopolitics and Everyday Life*, Aldershot: Ashgate, pp.235-248.
- Askins, Kye and Rachel Pain. 2011. Contact zones: participation, materiality and the messiness of interaction. *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space* 29(5), 803-21.
- Atkinson, Sarah, Victoria Lawson and Janine Wiles. 2011. Care of the body: spaces of practice. *Social & Cultural Geography* 12(6), 563-572.
- Back, Les. 2007. *The Art of Listening*. London: Berg.
- Barnett, Clive and David Land. 2007. Geographies of generosity: Beyond the 'moral turn'. *Geoforum* 38(6), 1065-1075.
- Bondi, Liz. 2008. On the relational dynamics of caring: a psychotherapeutic approach to emotional and power dimensions of women's care work. *Gender, Place and Culture* 15, 249-265.
- Bowlby, Sophie. 2011. Friendship, co-presence and care: neglected spaces. *Social & Cultural Geography* 12(6), 605-622.
- Bunnell, Tim, Sallie Yea, Linda Peake, Tracey Skelton and Monica Smith. 2012. Geographies of friendships. *Progress in Human Geography* 36(4), 490-507.
- Conlon, Deidre, Nicholas Gill, Imogen Tyler and Ceri Oeppen. 2013. Impact as Odyssey. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 13(1), 33-38.
- Cooke, Bill and Uma Kothari (eds.) 2001. *Participation: the new tyranny?* London: Zed Books.
- Darling, Jonathan. 2011. Giving space: Care, generosity and belonging in a UK asylum drop-in centre. *Geoforum* 42(4), 408-417.
- DCLG. 2007. *What Works in Community Cohesion*. London: DCLG.
- Horton, John and Peter Kraftl. 2009. Small acts, kind words and "not too much fuss": Implicit activism. *Emotion, Space and Society* 2(1), 14-23.
- Hyndman, Jennifer. 2010. Introduction: the feminist politics of refugee migration. *Gender, Place and Culture* 17(4), 453-459.
- Kindon, Sara, Rachel Pain and Mike Kesby (eds.) 2007. *Connecting people, participation and place: participatory action research approaches and methods*. London: Routledge.

- Korf, Benedikt. 2007. Antinomies of generosity: Moral geographies and post-tsunami aid in Southeast Asia. *Geoforum* 38(2), 366-378.
- Massey, Doreen. 2004. Geographies of responsibility. *Geografiska Annaler* 86B(1), 5-18.
- Matejskova, Tatiana and Helga Leitner. 2011. Urban encounters with difference: the contact hypothesis and immigrant integration projects in eastern Berlin. *Social & Cultural Geography* 12(7), 717-741.
- Mee, Kathleen and Sarah Wright. 2009. Geographies of belonging. *Environment and Planning A* 41(4), 772-779.
- Mouffe, Chantal. 2005 *On the Political*. New York: Routledge.
- Nayak, Anoop. 2012. Race, religion and British multiculturalism: The political responses of Black and Minority Ethnic voluntary organisations to multicultural cohesion. *Political Geography* 31(7), 454-463.
- ONS 2013 http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_290335.pdf
- Parekh, Bhikhu. 2000. *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*. London: Palgrave.
- Phillips, Deborah, Cathy Davis and Peter Ratcliffe. 2007. British Asian narratives of urban space. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32(2), 217-234.
- Probyn, Elspeth. 1996. *Outside Belongings*. London: Routledge.
- Simonsen, Kirsten. 2008. Practice, Narrative and the 'Multicultural City': A Copenhagen Case. *European Urban and Regional Studies* 15(2), 145-158.
- Staeheli, Lynn, Patricia Ehrkamp, Helga Leitner and Caroline Nagel. 2012. Dreaming the ordinary: Daily life and the complex geographies of citizenship. *Progress in Human Geography* 36(5), 628-644.
- Valentine, Gill. 2008. Living with difference: reflections on geographies of encounter. *Progress in Human Geography* 32(3), 323-37.
- Wise, Amanda and Selvaraj Velayutham (eds.). 2009. *Everyday Multiculturalism*. Basingtoke: Palgrave.
- Wood, Nicola and Louise Waite. 2011 Editorial: Scales of belonging. *Emotion, Space and Society* 4, 201-2.
- Yuval-Davis, Nira, Kalpana Kannabiran and Ulrike Vieten. 2006. *The Situated Politics of Belonging*. London: Sage.
- Zizek, Slavoj. 2008. Tolerance as an Ideological Category. *Critical Inquiry* 34(4), 660-682.