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## Existing in-between two worlds: supporting asylum seeking women living in temporary accommodation through a creative movement and art intervention

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### ABSTRACT

In this reflective article we introduce Moving Space, a creative movement and art project supporting female Asylum Seekers as they move through the transient space of temporary accommodation. We explore how this cross-modal approach supports women to anchor experiences of displacement, loss and trauma through the use of embodied and visual creative process. Moreover, we argue that the transient nature of the therapeutic space brings into focus women's resourcefulness and resilience despite the adversity and uncertainty they are experiencing.

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**KEYWORDS** Migration; art; movement; female asylum seekers; transient therapeutic space; resilience

### Introduction

In this article we present our work with asylum seeking women who, on arrival in the UK, have been temporarily housed within an inner-city hostel, which operates collaboratively with the Home Office. First, we introduce the Moving Space Project, how it came into being, its aims, objectives and scope as a community intervention. We then explore two areas emerging from our observations so far: (i) working with the experience of forced migration and (ii) emerging themes from the group process. We explore cross-modality (Burrell & Cohen, 2018), integrating embodied and visual tools, as a holistic approach underpinned by existing literature evidencing trauma-focused (Uy & Okubo, 2018; Van der Kolk, 2014), culturally sensitive (Hanania, 2018) and arts informed (Dieterich-Hartwell & Koch, 2017; Dokter, 1998; Hanania, 2018; Pierce, 2014; Rousseau et al., 2005; Uy & Okubo, 2018) interventions to enhance the physical and mental well-being of this marginalised population. Furthermore, we explore the importance of

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resilience in our understanding of the asylum-seeking experience (Papadopoulos, 2007) grounded in the idea of 'body as home' (Papadopoulos, 2015).

We reflect on our work from the position of facilitator (Claire and Marika), and researcher (Marina). Two of us are dance movement psychotherapists (Claire and Marina) and one of us is an art psychotherapist (Marika). We all came to this project with a background in mental health clinical practice (National Health Service) and collaborate as co-founders and directors of a local community interest company. As individuals we hold our own stories of migration, as we have all had experiences of relocation and immigration at different stages of our life.

For the purposes of this article, it is important to distinguish between the definitions of 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' in legal terms. According to Article 1 of the 1951 UN Convention, a refugee is defined as 'an individual who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence who is unable or unwilling to return due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on his or her race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group' (International Justice Resource Centre). On the other hand, an asylum seeker 'is someone whose request for sanctuary has yet to be processed. Every year, around one million people seek asylum [...] during mass movements of refugees, usually as a result of conflict or violence, it is not always possible or necessary to conduct individual interviews with every asylum seeker who crosses a border. These groups are often called "prima facie" refugees' (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees).

While a person who has fled their home country in order to seek asylum in another country, is not yet legally recognised as a 'refugee', seeking asylum remains a human right (Amnesty International UK). Different countries have their own asylum systems and procedures adding another complexity to the asylum seeker's experience. In the UK for example, 'it is very difficult for people seeking asylum to provide the evidence required to be granted protection' (Refugee Council). The Refugee Council states that 'in the year ending September 2019, 48% of initial decisions resulted in a grant of asylum or other form of protection. Initial Home Office decision-making remains poor. Many refugees had to rely on the courts rather than the Government to provide them with the protection they need. The proportion of asylum appeals allowed in the year ending Sept 2019 was 43%'.

Women's claims are often more problematic to resolve. The (often) hostile asylum system discourages women from fully disclosing the nature of the violence they have endured. Many asylum-seeking women have their claims refused, which results in them turning to the courts to seek protection. As of 2005 anyone recognised as a refugee can stay in the UK for up to five years. This makes planning for the future difficult and uncertain.

Already with complex and harrowing stories of migration, the asylum-seeking women making their way through the temporary accommodation

are often medically vulnerable and many are victims of torture, rape or HIV Positive. In his article in the British Journal of General Practice Taylor explains that 'asylum seekers fare worse than the UK population on almost all measures of health and wellbeing. The health effects of the immigration process may be considered in terms of the past and present consequences of forced migration' (Taylor, 2009, p.766).

Existing literature on therapeutic work with women refugees highlights the themes of loss (Vromans, Schweitzer, Brough, Correa-Velez, & Lenette, 2017), dissociation (Pierce, 2014), trauma (Uy & Okubo, 2018; Schouten et al, 2015) and, more broadly, cultural bereavement (Bhugra & Becker, 2005), as relevant to the therapeutic process. Even though often such difficult experiences are expressed and contained (with)in the creative process, we have found resilience (Guney, Atik, & Lundmark, 2018; Verreault, 2017), adaptability (Papadopoulos, 2007) and resourcefulness (Papadopoulos, 2015) to also be recurring themes in the women's narratives. Given the many linguistic, cultural, legal and psycho-social barriers impacting the work we argue that 'offering dual-modality support [...] (provides) adaptable ground to nurture evolving experience' (Burrell & Cohen, 2018, 15). In this sense the creative group process builds on women's innate capacity to kinaesthetically empathise with their (and others') experience (Rova, 2017) through a reflexive exploration of movement improvisation and art making.

Given the unpredictable and short-term nature of our contact with asylum seeking women living in temporary accommodation, the Moving Space project was not set up as a psychotherapeutic programme but rather as an open creative therapeutic group. The observations and reflections shared in this article will inform a more thorough evaluation of the project after its completion. As part of the written account of the work we share selected artwork produced by the facilitators who worked alongside the participating women. Aspects of the facilitators' lived experience of 'holding' these women and the thematic development of the group process are contained within these illustrations.

## The moving space project

The purpose of the Moving Space Project is to provide support to female asylum seekers, living in transient circumstances. It provides a bespoke support group, in which movement and art are being used to benefit and improve mental and physical wellbeing. The project was designed for a housing hostel which provides accommodation to asylum seekers, who are waiting to be moved out of the city boundaries under the Home Office Dispersal Act. This period marks the beginning of what is most likely to be a long process, that of applying for refugee status in the UK. Often described as a suspended state of 'limbo', as if in between worlds or departed but not

yet arrived; it is anxiety provoking time for many residents, triggered by unpredictable and uncertain outcomes.

After a period of consultation and liaison with the occupational therapists at the hostel an initial meeting was organised through a local day centre organisation. The day centre service had a long-standing relationship with both the occupational therapists at the hostel and the type of movement arts-based support group proposed by the authors. At this meeting, female asylum seekers, living with compromised mobility and limited interpersonal skills, were identified as vulnerable and isolated within the setting. It was thought that they would benefit highly from the creative, therapeutic nature of the expressive movement and art-based approach. Funding for the project was secured through a non-departmental public body supporting organisations in the UK that help improve communities. Relevant policies and risk assessment procedures were put in place before the launch of the project.

Participants in the project are invited to co-create a safe and nurturing environment in which creative expression is encouraged through movement improvisation and image making. Non-verbal ways of working are seminal in establishing potential lines of communication between women from diverse cultural backgrounds, speaking different languages. The focus of the creative sessions is to nurture the women's own innate potential for self-care, through fostering resilience. At all times validation is given to diversity, unique cultural identity and personal belief systems.

The group was designed to run for 30 weeks, organised in 3 cycles of 10 weeks. It aimed to deliver groups to approximately 10 participants in each block of sessions. As the Home Office criteria for the dispersal is based on a case-by-case assessment, the length of residential stay at the hostel can vary from 2 weeks to 6 months. Therefore, an open access group was envisaged, accommodating the transient nature of the setting whilst providing as much continuity and flexibility to participants as possible. Continuous liaison between the facilitators and the link occupational therapists enables appropriate group referrals and a flow to group access. The facilitators also ensure that regular feedback from the sessions is handed back to the occupational therapists. Group records are maintained for each cycle including group participation and process material. The facilitating team provides all creative materials for the work including movement props (balls, scarves, ribbons, stretchy cloth), art materials (watercolours, oil pastels, dry art and collage material) and a selection of ethnically diverse music. Art work produced in the group is kept in a folder, which travels with the therapists to and from the hostel. The art folder is stored securely after each session and during breaks in the project. A three-part peer supervision meeting is held between the two facilitators and the researcher at the beginning, mid-point and end of each cycle. The purpose of this meeting is twofold: (i) It provides a reflective practice space for the facilitating team and (ii) it feeds into the monitoring

and evaluation of the project. At the time of writing this article 2 out of 3 group cycles have been completed.

### **Working with the experience of forced migration**

As we began to locate our work within this transient zone the notion of 'in-betweenness' started to crystallise in our thinking. Having recently landed into this new context, the women are neither fully here (not settled, unknown legal status and onward journey) nor there (they have been forced to leave home). This is akin to van Gennep's (1960) idea of liminality and his conceptualisation of the threshold between two transitory spaces: separation (from original state) and incorporation (into a new state of being). The middle state of in-betweenness is often characterised by ambiguity, uncertainty and loss of control but also holds potential for change and transformation.

We also noticed multiple parallel narratives unfolding between our experience of arriving at the service and the women's experiences of liminality. For example, in order to access the activity room, where the session usually takes place, we must navigate a series of secure entry systems. Our experience of disorientation negotiating the inner boundaries of the hostel reflects the women's turbulent experiences navigating borders and arriving to a new and unknown territory. Residents are frequently moved within the hostel and therefore keeping track with group participants during recruitment proves difficult. The women are constantly on the move, never fully settled or resting. Yet they live in an indefinite state of suspension, of waiting, in this transient border zone.

The room allocated for the group session is basic and often in poor condition. Despite this we make the most of the space we have and use our materials and props to create an inviting and safe space. This reminds us of the women's capacity to make do with limited resources; creating a temporary home, after a temporary home for themselves and their family. The group materials are stored in a trolley that travels with the therapists. The trolley thus becomes a symbol of a 'mobile resource', much like a refugee's suitcase becomes a mobile resource to them. Soon after the launch of the group, we were informed that building works scheduled to take place in the hostel would prevent access to the activity room during cycle two of the project. As a result, a temporary home for the group was sought and found in the adjacent church hall; facilitators and group members symbolically enacting another forced migration.

Power dynamics are inherent in every group context, but perhaps they become more prominent where refugee populations are concerned, due to the socio-political tensions arising therein. For example, in our roles as group leaders we are at the same time close and far from the women's experiences. We are close, as women resonating through our own experiences of relocation. And we are afar, as we become a kind of 'host nation

representative' standing securely on the same ground that is still uncertain for the asylum-seeking women. Moreover, the group identity is by no means identified by homogeneous characteristics. The women come from diverse cultural, religious, economic and geo-political circumstances. Holding these tensions safely allows us to stay present in the unfolding process. Shifting between positions of 'knowing' and 'not-knowing' supports the co-creation of power dynamics. The women, thus, become active influencers as they bring their own expertise (lived experience) into the work. The alternate leadership between the two facilitators (and their corresponding modalities) further models shifting between positions of familiarity and being (with) the alien other.

During one session the women attending the group were playing with a large piece of blue fabric. Two people stood at each end, synchronising their movements, making a single wave movement travel through the cloth. The other women then explored passing under the cloth playing with the notion of getting to the other side. The game required a sense of risk taking, which most had no hesitancy in taking. However, the game also required a sense of timing, a sense of breath, which in turn required a stillness, a pause, a being here; at least long enough to catch the next wave, long enough to take the next step.

Claire's image (Figure 1), created after the cloth exploration, encapsulates her experience of facilitating the Moving Space. In this image a sea of blue surrounds a group of people. A space, created by a figure pushing its boundaries open,



Figure 1. 'Under the sea'.

offers what seems to be a shelter for the group. The image holds the juxtapositions of movement and stillness, chaos and containment and embodies the liminal space the women find themselves in.

O'Reilly's (2018) research using participatory photography to capture the lived experiences of asylum seekers, conceptualises liminality within spatial, temporal and ontological contexts. O' Reilly invites us to consider that our encounters with asylum seekers in this in-between state are inevitably shaped by: the physical environment within which they are situated as well as women's living and housing conditions; the temporal ambiguity relative to the duration of their stay in the temporary accommodation (which could be anything from days, months or even years in some cases); and the perpetual state of uncertainty the women live in and its impact on their psychological wellbeing and sense of identity. Given the fact that such core needs as safety, shelter and nourishment are not being met adequately, we have found the frame of using 'creative arts therapies as temporary home' (Dieterich-Hartwell & Koch, 2017) and more specifically Papadopoulos (2015) conceptualisation of 'body as home' to be useful underpinnings to our work with asylum seeking women.

The body offers a unique therapeutic resource especially when individuals find themselves in states of uncertainty, upheaval and change with accompanying feelings of considerable disorientation. All this can result in helplessness, incomprehension, despair and hopelessness that can lead to a wide variety of other negative feelings and symptoms. Even in states when the body has been damaged or when it is not functioning well, once a person shifts his/her focus onto the unique abilities and characteristics of the body and appreciates their significance, substantial therapeutic effects can be activated.

Papadopoulos 2015, p. 2

Nina Papadopoulos goes on to develop these unique characteristics into 8 categories including continuity and stability, adaptational and transformational change, body language, body as resource, differentiation and playfulness. Creative process is the meeting context of the cross-modal Moving Space project. The visual and embodied process invites: spontaneity and self-expression, non-verbal communication transcending language and cultural boundaries, exploration of transformation (contained within the art form, art making or dance), recognition of individual and group resources and a negotiation of relationships within a culturally sensitive framework. The Moving Space project encourages female asylum seekers to connect to their sense of self through embodied and visual expression and communication of their experiences. It also nourishes their resilience and adaptability as illustrated in the examples below.



## Emerging themes from the group process

### *'Creative process as a steppingstone'*

The women who come to the group often struggle to come to terms with the separation from their home communities whilst facing an unknown journey towards establishing a new home within UK society. Some have been traumatised from the impact of civil war, from the impact of fleeing; others may have seen or faced human rights abuse and persecution. Mothers cope with the harrowing decisions they have had to make and grieve for children left behind. Many evoke family members unaccounted for in detention or conflict. All have survived incredible journeys.

Despite the complexities of each member's individual case, their experiences can be gently explored and validated through the shared creative process. Journeying through the transient space of the group, the women's explorations evoke both a realisation of loss (of who and what they have left behind) and a hope for the future (having survived the journey so far). The creative process thus, becomes a steppingstone towards the women's articulation of both these experiences. The cross-modality approach offers an opportunity for participants to tap into vulnerable feelings and reconnect with the ground (through the embodied explorations) and to visualise coherent and incoherent aspects of their story (through the art making). The group offers a vehicle to visit past and future journeys, a forum to discover new languages and to experience one's self differently in the exploration of unfolding identity, cultural interplay and the co-creation of meaning.

It is worth noting that therapeutic practices vary widely in the communities these women originate from. As creative therapists and facilitators we are careful not to impose what could arguably be described as West European worldviews of psychotherapeutic practice. The creative nature of the group appears to be a less intrusive way of holding and sharing subjective experience. The dialogic interplay between creative engagement (individually and as a group) and reflective discussion enables women to actively co-create the pace, depth and direction of the psychosocial layers explored within the session. Moreover, the facilitators' 'alongside position' in the work advocates a non-judgemental and inclusive frame for the group process.

### *The 'floating house'*

Over time the group (and group room) have become a trusted, known 'home' space providing an outer layer of containment, a gentle, flexible membrane in which to experience the present. The flexible holding of the space enables movement. Thus, the present moment exploration can encompass an oscillation between what has been left behind and what was yet to come. In a present moment labelled 'temporary', full of uncertainties, the women

can perhaps be safe enough to acknowledge feelings of loss (and being lost) yet maintain a sense of looking for an emergent thread of connectivity to an unknown future. Drawings of homes left behind take time to evolve into the imaginative conceptual depiction of a future home. In between these two landmarks, the group provides a 'half-way-house', a place where the not knowing can be given form, shaped and often left behind. As Rebecca Solnit (2005) observes: 'there is another art of being at home in the unknown, so that being in its midst isn't cause for panic or suffering, of being at home with being lost' (p.10). She goes on to describe how distance shifts in our embodied landscape as we move through lived narrative, time and space. In this way, for the women we worked with, what had been near had now become far away and what had been far away was still out of sight.

A recurring metaphor in the artwork, produced in the sessions, is the depiction of houses or buildings that we have come to describe as 'floating'. This is because these buildings usually appear in the middle of the page as if hovering above the ground. Symbolically we can make sense of these images as a communication of the experience of up-rootedness.

Participants' accompanying symptoms such as migraine, depression, anxiety, back and joint pain, poor sleep and stomach disorders reveal the invisible impact of the treacherous journeys, these women have made, onto their body. Many describe their symptoms as triggered by the stress and anxiety of their current life experience, a suspended state of disempowerment within the frame of a new or unresolved immigration case. In such moments of chaos, the group attempts to offer safe ground when life's next steps are so literally 'up in the air'. The group thus becomes an anchor, a space to pause and take stock of individual journeys and stories.

The women acknowledge how the basic day to day struggle to nourish themselves and their families on route to a more permanent home, impacts on their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. The hostel provides basic meals to its residents who describe the 'English' food as high in carbohydrates, with too much white rice and low-quality bread. Choice and fresh produce is limited. Therefore, on many occasions from within the imaginative landscape of the group, cooking pots and nutritious meals from the homeland are described. On one occasion a participant drew the image of 'my mother's kitchen', adding in details and labelling much desired food items. 'I don't need to take the picture with me' she told us on leaving the session, 'I have it in me'. This is an example of how the creative process supports women to reclaim internalised resources of 'homeness', identity and resilience despite the adverse circumstances they find themselves in. It is perhaps why participants report that attending the group brings them relief, relaxation, management of stress and anxiety and improved sleep.

### *'Making connections'*

Dwelling in the rawness of a body where loss is known, in the decay of change, in the act of leaving life behind – the experience of disconnection in the group is as palpable as the desire for connectivity. Burrell and Cohen (2017) explore how shifting between image making and movement improvisation, gives rise to many layers of connectivity and disconnection through a layering and filtering process of the two mediums.

Is it layering as in repairing a surface, or as in establishing foundations? Are we creating striations of differing colours, a range of possibilities? Is filtering sifting to eliminate unwanted matter, clarifying core components? Or perhaps allowing the soil to crack, and fresh water to irrigate new paths? Is there therefore a sense of connecting and disconnecting?

Burrell & Cohen, 2017, p.28

They go on to describe how the two-medium approach allows for a shift in position, a potential change of perspective, connection and disconnection which is highlighted in the following vignette from the Moving Space group.

A young Iranian woman who had just arrived in the setting, was introduced to the group by a regularly attending resident from the same cultural background. She came dressed in leggings and as she settled into the initial check-in circle, she expressed her readiness to move and her love of dancing. Dancing she said always made her happy. After some warm-up exercises the group's improvised movement soon developed into patterned folk style dancing in which cultural differences were expressed and identities acknowledged. There was smiling and laughter, perhaps an overriding desire for release. As our feet beat the ground a sense of survival was defined, celebrating our connectivity and shared aliveness.

Transitioning to the art making table invited a shift into a more subjective frame. Using paint, the young woman began to depict a landscape filling the page with a vast sense of green hills and open sky. She then drew a small figure with outstretched arms, defining further the sense of scale. The therapist gently inquired about the image, and silently the young woman painted a small black arrow pointing towards the solitary figure and wrote 'me'. The profound sense of aloneness defined her sadness and she looked tearful. The therapist wondered whether this was how she felt on arriving in the U.K. 'No' the young woman said, as she began making additional marks. 'This is me walking, I have been walking for six months'. As she expanded her story, she continued painting what she described as 'a jungle', a tangle of small crosses in different colours. Beginning to sob, she said: 'I never want to go through another jungle in my life'.

The young woman's story was held in the group, the image witnessed silently by the other women in the closing circle. Consoled, she thanked the facilitators and was encouraged to attend again the following week.

However, as the young woman met the criteria for immediate transfer under the HO Dispersal Act, we did not see her again.

The notion of a group coming together by such a random process, might seem unlikely; and when thought about, quite extraordinary. People meeting together, having journeyed from all corners of the earth, by chance passing through the same temporary space at the same time. For many the group might provide the first safe place to test the water of multicultural experience.

While all the women who attend are free to choose a place in the group, all exist to some degree on their own islands within. Sometimes pairings or subgroups emerge, languages are shared, and cultural familiarity offers extended ground. Sometimes places need naming and a sense of agency and advocacy seeks identity and witness. A map, made visible in the group, has proven useful in stimulating interactions between members and locating self – other paths.

The group attends to many challenges and transitions as it crosses borders', shifting between cultures and continents, between traditional beliefs and contemporary reality, between past and future lives. Between inhale and exhale. The group's connectivity emerges from a shared desire to secure the future. In many ways the group process brings into focus a readiness to take the next step. The focus of the work can be about telling stories, building bridges, exploring patterns, and developing new languages. It is a place where companionship into an unknown future is shared in language that comes from way deep in our existence and survival.

### *'The bird and nest vignette'*

In one session, a woman with poor mobility attended the session for the third time walking with crutches. During the improvised movement exploration, the therapist acknowledged how she appeared more confident, more at ease with moving. The woman, who we call Betty, agreed that this was the case and acknowledged how physiotherapy sessions had been enabling her rehabilitation to some degree. However, Betty emphasised that the pain she carried was now in her head and she doubted she would be able to actively engage. Gently encouraged, she was able to make a little connectivity to herself and others.

In the image making part of the session Betty sat looking at a large blank page before her, then leaning over she began drawing as if in a protective or concealed way. 'What's that you have there' asked (author's name), who was sitting alongside making a collage image. Betty sat back to reveal a small bird drawn in fine pencil, she said she did not know why she had drawn this bird and gestured towards it as if to devalue her endeavour. Then for some time Betty returned to holding her head, saying the pain was too bad.

Around the image making table the conversation shifted, with another participant speaking about her own children and Betty was asked whether she had any children. Betty thought about this for some time and then carefully wrote down the numbers; 3,3,2,3 alongside the bird. Betty then added the numbers, as if accounting for them, 'I have eleven' she said. Conversation continued and the woman returned to drawing. Betty returned to her image this time drawing several small eggs under the bird. The other participant asked: 'how many have you got there?' The woman counted again and replied: 'seven'. "You need another four then," replied the other participant. By the end of the session, Betty had completed the nest of 11 eggs and as usual participants were asked whether they would like to take their images with them or leave them behind. "I'll take it with me," the woman said, 'I rather like it'. And folding it up carefully she asked the therapist to help her to put it in her pocket and left the group.

The two images below (Figures 2 and 3) were made by the two facilitators whilst working alongside Betty and other group participants in the session described above. As facilitators their 'alongside' position within the unfolding emerging narrative is reflected in the image making, perhaps supporting a deeper embodied metaphor; temporary containment, portable, pocket size, locating. Marika's image response (Figure 2) may be understood as an externalisation of the need for a soft nest, a safe container for Betty's reclaimed 'eggs'; a metaphor perhaps for providing a safe home for her



**Figure 2.** Marika's illustration emerging during the 'nest and eggs' vignette.



**Figure 3.** Claire's illustration emerging during the 'nest and eggs' vignette

displaced children. Claire's image (Figure 3) response captures precarious entanglements, some eggs appear safe in the net others look as if they are slipping away. The facilitators' non-verbal attunement to Betty's story, as illustrated by their image responses, reveals the creative process as an important intervention in supporting asylum seeking women, who may not have the words to articulate their experience.

## Conclusion

In this reflective article we have introduced the Moving Space Project, a creative movement and art initiative supporting female asylum seekers living in temporary accommodation. We have sought to contribute insights into women's

experiences of existing in-between two worlds; their past life and an unknown future. We have discussed the cross-modal creative group as a safe space for women's articulation of difficult experiences. We have further suggested that the transient nature of the group fosters resilience and validates asylum seeker's resourcefulness and adaptability. The facilitators' experiences of working alongside the group offer further insights into the complexities of working with(in) transient spaces, holding ambiguity and staying with the unknown.

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