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Exploring Imagined Temporalities in Resettlement Workers' Narratives: Renegotiating Temporal and Emotional Boundaries in Post-Brexit Britain

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Abstract

This paper develops the concept of 'imagined temporalities' to explore multiple temporal subjectivities, time cultures, 'myths', and realities evident in interviews with resettlement workers who were part of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) in Merseyside, United Kingdom (UK). Conducted in 2019, the interviews took place as the triggering of Article 50 signalled the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union (EU). This period of unprecedented social, economic, and political changes formed a crucial backdrop framing our interviewees' narratives. The views of resettlement workers have been little explored and are employed here to complement the insights provided by work undertaken by others with refugees and asylum seekers. This research provides important insights into their perceptions of the interplay of factors that affect belonging and access to supports for refugees and asylum seekers, revealing wider, largely underreported, concerns.[1] These include, their own personal experiences working in support services and system changes, driven by growing socio-political pressures that impact on community-building among refugees during their resettlement. Significantly, debates about "Brexit" and the UK's political future, as well as heated public discussions of the historical legacies of colonialism which underpin the present treatment of migrants, are reflected in these resettlement workers' views as well. Subsequently, this paper employs the concept of 'imagined temporalities' to explore how support workers understand the treatment of migrants by social and political systems—and their own personal struggles and hopes,—against this wider, divisive post-Brexit backdrop. Overall, the paper underlines the highly politicised space the resettlement workers operate in, where they balance the needs of service users in the midst of constraints imposed by overly rigid time regimes.

Keywords Imagined temporalities · Resettlement workers · Time cultures · UK Resettlement Scheme · Merseyside

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Introduction

This paper analyses the impacts of time cultures and imagined temporalities on Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. We employ and develop the concept of 'imagined temporalities' to critically explore the latent social assumptions about temporality that remain embedded in UK resettlement policies. To do so, we draw on in-depth interviews carried out with a small cohort of those working to support Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in Merseyside as part of a UK-wide resettlement programme. Employing the insights and experiences of resettlement workers is designed to complement research undertaken by others with refugees and asylum seekers themselves and professionals and volunteers in the field (Dimitriadis, 2023; Moskovich & Binhas, 2015). These interviews were also conducted against the backdrop of a unique socio-political context, the aftermath of the European Union (EU) Membership Referendum in 2016.

The article is divided into six parts. After first framing our discussion theoretically by briefly outlining some of the relevant literature on temporality and migration, the article then outlines the methodology of the fieldwork undertaken. Part three places the issue of temporality within the specific policy context of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), while part four focuses on the impact of 'waiting' and 'uncertainty' as key temporal dimensions that frame the refugee and asylum seeker experience. Part five then considers the 'imagined temporalities'—the intermingling and interaction of imagined (often illusionary) pasts and futures—that were evident in the debate on 'Brexit' (the UK's decision to leave the EU) and the ways in which this created 'uncertain futures' for refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants more broadly. Finally, the paper seeks to draw out some of the implications of our concerns for future policy making.

In that regard, the paper argues that temporality is largely overlooked in policy-making, which remains overtly centralised, delimiting opportunities for high-quality participatory forums with asylum seekers and resettlement workers. This lack of emphasis on time cultures, 'shared repertoires of time related meanings and solutions to everyday problems' (Rau, 2015, p. 373) exacerbates lack of societal understanding of the lived experiences of Syrian asylum seekers and refugees, in relation to liminal time, suspended time, and processes of negotiating temporal (as well as geographic and administrative) borders. In this paper, we illuminate failures of successive government policies on resettlement, showing that despite political commitments to support refugees for a 12-month period under the UK Resettlement Schemes, government policy fundamentally casts resettlement as a linear event aimed at cultural integration and eventually, assimilation. However, this contradicts realities of resettlement evident in support workers' experiences where resettlement is defined as non-linear, lifelong processes characterised by complex cultural learning of norms and mores, mixing/fusion with life ways from countries/communities of origin, and processes of re-learning, reframing, and reimagining. The paper focuses on 'imagined temporalities' and temporal borders to examine the dilemmas and anxieties created for refugees and resettlement workers) in terms of waiting, uncertainty and the imagined time(s) of Brexit.

Essentially, this perspective argues against overly simplistic understandings of 'culture shock', integration and assimilation that pervade some international perspectives on refugee and asylum seekers' lives, which assume that assimilation is the ultimate pinnacle for all migrants and is overly reductionist, universalising migrants' life ways (Cupsa, 2018). These latter perspectives are infused in UK policies but the complexity of Syrian people's experiences in the VPRS and resettlement workers is highly nuanced displaying much more complex processes of cultural learning than linear understandings of integration and assimilation. Subsequently, we argue for a more negotiated understanding of migrants' and support workers' experiences that is grounded in cultural learning, which encompasses greater understanding of migrants' time cultures prior to UK entry and cultural learning through which they devise strategies to negotiate labyrinthine temporal, emotional, and geographic boundaries.

Imagined Temporalities, Waiting, and Uncertainty

Recently, there is increasing focus on the 'politics of time' to understand the experiences and challenges facing new migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees (Cwerner, 2001; Griffiths et al., 2013). Part of the 'new mobilities turn', much of this work examines time as relational, non-linear, and complex—where 'multiple dimensions of time co-exist' and time is experienced 'more than subjectively as an open-ended folding of co-existing pasts, presents and futures' (Clayton & Vickers, 2019, 1466; see also Sheller & Urry, 2006; Shubin, 2015). Multiplicity involves intersections of 'institutional times of policy and governance' and 'biographic time' of migrants, 'involving not only everyday lived time' but also 'imaginaries of pasts, presents and futures' (Baas & Yeoh, 2019, p. 165; see also Robertson, 2014).

Central to our concerns is this tension between what Clayton and Vickers (2019) conceptualise as the 'dominant temporalities' of the official institutionalised imagined time regimes of governance, policy and policymakers, and the biographical, experiential temporalities of refugees and asylum seekers, which are multi-layered, heterogeneous, and dependent on previous life experiences. While institutional/bureaucratic time 'claims to be absolute, universal, total', personal time is construed as 'personal, quotidian, limited' (Gross, 1982 cited in Griffiths et al., 2013, p. 30). Likewise, the former—concerned (at best) with acculturation, integration, and channelled belonging, if not exclusion and expulsion—is enshrined in projections, trajectories, and imagined futures upon which service provision is based. In turn, they act as barriers and sites of frustration, harm, and resistance, demarcating and confounding the search for an unfettered—or at least less constrained—imagined future on the part of migrants. Crucial too therefore is understanding time in relation to exercises of power and the ways in which immigration policies operate as 'tools of discipline' (Baas & Yeoh, 2019; Cwerner, 2001). In this paper, that core tension of intersecting, competing and asymmetrical imagined temporalities is played out in relation to two parallel issues—the active production of 'waiting' and 'uncertainty'.

Critical explorations of time as an aspect of migration have also seen a growing academic focus on 'waiting' as a 'a distinct spatial and temporal dimension of

stasis for migrants, as a dynamic effect of international geopolitics and a lived facet of social structures' (Conlon, 2011, p. 355; see also Griffiths, 2014; Jeffrey, 2008; Olson, 2015). Understood in this way, class-based, gendered, and racialised power relations frame asylum systems; the delays and enforced (im)-mobilities confronting refugees and asylum seekers involve multiple forms of waiting that are 'actively produced, embodied, experienced, politicized and resisted' (Conlon, 2011, p. 355). As Sanyal (2018, p. 67) notes on the 'politics of waiting' for Syrian refugees in Lebanon 'making people wait or remain still' is an 'act of entrenching political subordination'—which involves 'colonizing their futures'. Immobility and waiting can be experienced as sources of shame or panic; lives placed on pause signify loss of control and agency, and anxiety is induced by slow decision-making and complex governance that 'shape both refugees imagined futures as well as their present status' (Coddington, 2018, p. 326;). An overarching sense of insecurity can be the outcome when precarious labour and living conditions are combined with being placed in 'suspended time' (Nobil Ahmad, 2008; Elliot, 2016).

In this context, the generation of 'temporal borders' are institutionalised means to 'regulate the time and speed' of the movement of migrants into labour markets whilst shaping asylum seekers' access to necessary services (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013, p. 132). Here again, the politicised, active production of waiting and uncertainty are predicated on, and rooted in, competing imagined temporalities of—on the one hand—official future-envisioned trajectories of assimilation and belonging and—on the other—refugee and asylum seeker's experience of time and displacement which remain nuanced and heterogeneous.

Migrant precarity generates uncertainties that are substantially, exacerbated by Brexit debates—a disruption that decentred not only projected expectations of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, but also of institutional visions of the asylum system itself—and crucially of those working within it. If the nation is an 'imagined community', the projection of a collective future is a crucial dimension both of national political cultures and distinct ideological projects (Anderson, 1983). As Griffiths et al., 2013, p. 27) argue, such 'imagined collective futures' generate 'shared purpose and as such are envisaged as countering diversity or uncertainty and encourage the assimilation of migrants'. It is in this context that the core message of Brexit matters—centred on an idealised image of a supposedly re-born 'Global Britain'—in which 'taking back control' means the ever-greater deregulation of market capitalism and halting inward EU (and other) migration. In many ways, this represented a decisive and profound ideological shift that set clear delimiting boundaries on who should share in collective, imagined futures.

Just as Brexit, as an ideological project, evoked and articulated 'popular imaginative geographies'—the 'narratives, visions and images of… the relationships between spaces, places, and people'—so those relationships were also projected in relation to time (Clarke & Moss, 2021, p. 733). Equally, as Leave-inspired 'imagined geographies' rested on idealisations of Britain's global position in the past, so too the imagined temporalities with which we are concerned are not only a future-focused matter of what will or might be. Instead, they are also concerned with what has (or might have) been—imagined pasts, as (re)envisioned and (re)constituted in the present. Brexit populism rested on 'fantasies of fulfilment' that simultaneously

promised (illusory) 'new beginnings' and a 'reclamation of [imagined] British essences' (Browning, 2019, p.222; O'Toole, 2018). Hence, imagined temporalities are concerned with unstable, multi-layered, and contested terrains of social memories, invented traditions, valorising and demonising myths, and different histories variously celebrated, re-articulated, partial, hidden, subaltern, and suppressed (Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Misztal, 2003). In this context, debates on Brexit provided a febrile paradigm of a politicised pressing into service of readings of the past—often nostalgia-hued and imbued with 'post-colonial melancholia'—to project and demarcate renewed and reinforced boundaries of belonging and exclusion into the future (Dorling & Tomlinson, 2020; Gilroy, 2006; Sanghera, 2021). In that context, the occlusion or obliteration of biographical, social pasts of refugees and asylum seekers contributed to a heightened uncertainty of their places in this future. Indeed, the disrupting uncertainties of Brexit ruptured the precarious, unfixed temporalities of the refugee experience, the linear future projections of the UK asylum system itself, and the future as imagined by those who actively support refugees.

Methodology

This research deployed an interpretivist design to acknowledge the subjective nature of the social world (Clark et al., 2021). Thus, semi-structured interviews were conducted with resettlement workers in a targeted support service for refugees in Merseyside. The service, which supports refugees who arrive to the UK through resettlement schemes, was affiliated with the VPRS. This was one of three schemes available at this time; from April 2020, all three were consolidated and replaced by the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS).[1] The participants' roles as resettlement workers entail providing new arrival refugees with one-to-one guidance and support for accessing services in healthcare, finances, employment, housing, education, and transport. Daily tasks include accompanying individuals and families to the Job Centre to access Universal Credit,[2] providing support applying for school places or healthcare and assisting with any issues or concerns that arise during the 12-month allocation of support.

The participants' individual experiences supporting refugees and asylum seekers ranged from a couple of years to over a decade and across several charities. This allows them to reflect on different techniques and approaches to the resettlement process. Resettlement workers provide a nuanced perspective on the resettlement process as they hold a unique position within a counterculture working both alongside and against government policy in their pursuit to better support refugees and

[1] Alongside the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) introduced in 2014, there was also the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS) introduced in 2016 and the Gateway Protection Programme introduced in 2010. All of which ended in 2020.

[2] Universal Credit is the name of the UK's social welfare provision for those who are currently out of employment or cannot work.

asylum seekers (Moskovich & Binhas, 2015). Therefore, the work is exploratory in nature as we endeavoured to add to the existing knowledge of the experiences of refugees and at times asylum seekers through the lens of resettlement workers. The research yielded hitherto underexplored dimensions of asylum seeker experiences pertaining specifically to VPRS.

The lead author had previously volunteered at the service, providing the same one-to-one support to refugees in the local area which was the motivation for undertaking the research as it was an opportunity to further explore the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers. Research is never value-free; instead, it is coloured by institutional politics, political legacies, and individual life histories. Cognisant of power hierarchies that are gendered and racialised and subject to other, multiple subjectivities (e.g. class, power), she saw participants' stories and life experiences as inherently powerful and agentic.

Purposive sampling was used where participants are selected due to their knowledge of the topic that is relevant to the current study (Silverman, 2013). We were mindful of the risks of completing research in a service where the researcher was already known professionally. In particular, how interviewer effects could skew the data where participants might feel pressured to respond to questions in particular ways. To control for this, the interviewer gently probed participants about their answers using different question types to elicit responses on the same topic which were subsequently analysed for consistency. Consistent with a narrative style, interviews elicited stories of micro-communicative encounters and conventions which was consistent with the research focus on the complexity of 'ordinary', 'mundane' experiences of refugees, and resettlement workers pertaining to reimagined futures and negotiated temporalities. The literature review, conceptual framework, and interviews were conducted concurrently, fostering integration between different components of the research and facilitating a dynamic interaction between theory and method.

Five semi-structured interviews were completed, lasting for 40 to 50 min, which centred on topics including interagency working, opportunities and barriers to effectively negotiating challenges frequently encountered by refugees on arrival, changes in national/international regulations, and discourses of integration that predominate in policy arenas. Interviews were transcribed by the lead author as soon as possible and were analysed using thematic analysis (TA), where transcripts were read and re-read, and themes initially extracted. Subsequently, subthemes were re-analysed for consistency (Nowell et al., 2017). Transcripts were continually re-analysed in the light of emerging themes in the literature regarding governmental and societal debates about immigration and Brexit which formed the unique socio-cultural landscape of this research.

Exploring Imagined Temporalities in Policy and Lived Experiences

UK resettlement schemes envisage resettlement as a short to medium-term goal and a societal good which contradicts the lived experiences of refugees and resettlement workers. In 2019, there were two policy documents published by the

government Home Office directly related to resettlement; the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), Guidance for Local Authorities and Partners, and Resettlement: Policy Guidance (Home Office, Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government and Department for International Development, 2017; UK Visas and Immigration & Home Office, 2021). Both focused on the purposes and aims of resettlement schemes, with little mention of what the resettlement process should look like or how resettlement support should be undertaken. A third document—the Syrian Refugee Resettlement: A Guide for Local Authorities (Local Government Association & Migration Yorkshire, 2016)—provided limited information of resettlement processes and identified several issues referred to as 'cultural considerations' that potentially impacted on the integration of new arrivals. Tellingly, this policy frames the culture of new-arrival refugees and the UK as in conflict with each other. As a result, the language employed reflects assimilationist, normative perspectives on what resettlement should involve. Here, 'success' hinges on the degree to which the policy achieves the internalisation of purportedly 'British' cultural norms and values amongst refugees. This 'adjustment' is facilitated by a year-long allocation of support, whereby new arrival refugees are then able to navigate 'successfully' through their first 12-months in the UK.

The 'ideal type' of a uniform path to integration as set out by this policy—imagined as taking place within a specific, designated timeframe—was problematized by the resettlement workers interviewed, who were themselves engaged in this very process. This dominant, imagined temporality was contested by a far more nuanced picture, where the complex challenges experienced by refugees meant that, while 'progress' was evident in some discrete areas, it was far less evident in other aspects of 'everyday survival' (Coddington, 2018). Likewise, all the resettlement workers interviewed agreed that the 12-month allocation of support had varying degrees of 'success' for different people going through the same process—with some gaining much more than others. As Godwin noted, 'At the end of the 12-months we withdraw our support, it doesn't mean we certify them as having resettled and it works differently for different people'. This was a sentiment readily echoed and reinforced by Mahir: 'We know 12-months, it won't be enough for most of them, but there are a few who are very confident, who are doing things by themselves without depending on others'. The strict delineation of the timescale when such support was provided, and then, withdrawn was consequently viewed as being less attuned to the layeredness of refugees' needs and experiences, than to the demands of the machinations of institutionalised policy delivery.

As Clayton and Vickers (2019) suggest, while the experiences of resettlement are multifarious, non-linear, and unique to the individual—this was not reflected in a process that imposed strict temporal limits to the supports that workers were able to provide. An inability to reflect on, and respond to, people's specific needs by extending support beyond 12-month limits led to a sense among resettlement workers that the policy failed refugees, as 'successful' resettlement within that timescale was an unreasonable expectation—in sharp contrast to the imagined institutionalised temporalities established in policy. As Mukhtar noted, 'you cannot expect them to be 100% settled within 12-months'.

If the time regime of policies was at odds with the time culture of the refugee experience, there was also an acknowledgement that the 12-month allocation of support did have varying degrees of success. From resettlement workers' perspectives, the differentiated learning of refugees were viewed as the result of a mixture of individual personality traits, social backgrounds, and a reservoir of pre-existing skills that some were able to call upon, developed before seeking refuge. A key issue from the resettlement workers points of view was being able to recognise the extent to which some refugees were better equipped than others to cope and adapt with changing circumstances, and for support structures to respond accordingly. The range of capacities refugees were able to draw upon was extensive, as evidenced in Godwin's comments:

> Some arrive here with skills that make it easier for them to integrate or to be able to access services and some it takes much longer because of their experience's pre-arrival. Some come here non-literate they've never been to school, but they got along well because they didn't need literacy to earn their living, to interact, or to access services and suddenly they are in this literate community (Godwin).

Such differentiation in skills and experiences exacerbated the impacts of governing time regimes that regulates the temporal rhythms of settlement so that variations in terms of the specific subject positions of refugees can neither be acknowledged nor acted upon. Furthermore, for the majority of refugees, the allocation of 12-month support was too brief and unsuited to their needs. Support workers regularly noted that virtually all the refugees in receipt of support from resettlement schemes do not want supports to end.

> People don't want the support to end because they are worried that something awful will happen and they're not going to have anyone to turn to (Georgia).

The withdrawal of such inflexibly ordained time-limited supports is therefore a source of considerable, anxiety-inducing concern amongst refugees who arrive through resettlement schemes. An experience of policy induced anxiety which echoes those highlighted by Sanyal (2018). For the refugees who are supported by the resettlement workers in this research, the unease towards their withdrawal from resettlement schemes is shown through the negative emotions they attribute to the inevitable event whilst talking about the daunting prospect with resettlement workers. Therefore, the end of the 12-month period signifies a multiplicity of uncertainties (Griffiths et al., 2013).

For refugees and asylum seekers and the resettlement workers, the resettlement journey is therefore a nuanced and multifaceted phenomenon. Whilst there are some similarities across the resettlement experiences of refugees and asylum seekers, each individual journey is affected by a unique interlinking of social, economic, and political factors (Nobil Ahmad, 2008). It was striking too that, from the resettlement workers perspectives, far from being a process completed within a single year, resettlement is better understood as an elongated, lifelong

process. It is therefore a complex, diversified journey that needs to be re-imagined in the context of longer temporal frameworks that includes the individuals' life paths prior to asylum seeking that traverse both past and futures lying outside time-defined bounds of 'official' resettlement. This highly time-bounded perspective which underpins much UK immigration policy therefore seems alien to the negotiated, complex nature of refugees' unique geographical, temporal and biographical journeys (Clayton and Vickers, 2019).

This profound insight derived from the views of resettlement workers, stood in stark contrast to the policy frame within which they have operated, also means that resettlement only truly begins once an individual/family has had their policy-driven supports withdrawn and they must manage their lives on their own:

> Most people's resettlement doesn't start until we walk away. You learn lessons and you're walking a tightrope, but then you realise that the tightrope is a lot wider than you thought it was and then slowly but surely you find it (Georgia).

From this perspective, the experiential time of 'resettlement' takes place only when the timescale of the formal resettlement process, as currently constituted, has come to a close, thereby illuminating the futility of current policy frameworks to capture dynamic cultural learning with regards to routines and normative views on time use.

Temporal Borders, Waiting, and Uncertainty

Temporal borders are embedded within organisational policies and procedures that adversely affect refugees and asylum seekers' experiences by regulating the time and speed of access to necessary services. As Mezzadra and Neilson (2013, p. 132) note, temporal borders generate unique temporalities for migrants 'where the compression, elongation and partitioning of time exerts effects of control, filtering and selectivity'. They consequently result in refugees and asylum seekers experiencing extended periods of uncertainty as they wait to progress with their respective resettlement journey. However, periods of waiting and uncertainty may not be experienced in the same way by those who arrive via resettlement schemes. Matthew commented the following: 'depending on your circumstances whether you have come in the resettlement programme, or you have claimed asylum in the UK, your experiences can be completely different'.

The arrival of refugees through UK resettlement schemes is planned and organised in ways that differ from that of other migrants, which provides some degree of certainty to those who arriving through this route. They have already had their refugee status granted in another country and have been selected by the scheme to come to the UK. At the time of this research, once refugee status had been granted refugees were given limited leave to remain for 5 years.[3] In contrast, those who claim asylum on arrival to the UK must wait for their asylum claim to

[3] Those granted refugee status as of October 2021 now have indefinite leave to remain.

be processed to gain refugee status before they can begin the resettlement process with any certainty that they have the right to remain. It was the case that like those who arrived through resettlement schemes, persons granted refugee status from the asylum route were also only granted limited leave to remain for 5 years before this was changed to indefinite leave to remain from October 2021. However, as Michael who had worked with asylum seekers', continued, for those who have gone through the 'whole asylum system in the UK, their hopes and experiences can be different' because:

> A lot of the people that we work with on the resettlement programmes have had differing degrees of stability and certainly, know they have been selected, they are coming to the UK. It has been different when people have gone through the process here because people are in limbo. They have very little while they are here.

Even with the right to remain, asylum seekers do not receive the 12-month allocation of support for which refugees arriving through resettlement schemes are eligible and are at greater risk of having their needs ignored. The two routes to seeking refuge are treated differently with the resettlement scheme being favoured by government as greater temporal borders are placed on those who claim asylum upon arrival to the UK through withholding supports that they would have received through resettlement schemes. Consequently, asylum seekers are treated as subordinate with greater temporal borders placed on them through the lack of mandated policy support (Sanyal, 2018). From the perspective of resettlement workers, the anxiety-inducing experiences of waiting and uncertainty are explicitly evident in the asylum system (Coddington, 2018). Those refugees involved in resettlement schemes may be said to have a relative advantage in terms of the impact of temporal borders, compounded by access to social and economic resources:

> The experience of people on the resettlement programme is different to asylum seekers, who are in poor accommodation, in areas with massive socio-economic deprivation, which have social problems. I think that it's difficult for asylum seekers to feel part of anything because they are in a state of flux. They can't relax and get used to their environment because they don't know if they're staying. They're waiting for a decision or an appeal or a court date, or they have been refused and they're waiting to be evicted. Constant trauma (Georgia).

When asylum seekers' experiences are cast in such dire terms, refugees within resettlement schemes might be viewed in far more favourable terms. However, while the uncertainty of 'waiting' might not be as extreme; those arriving through resettlement schemes are not exempt from experiencing such periods of waiting either (Conlon, 2011; Sanyal, 2018). They may know they will be travelling to the UK, but this is still a future-focused process in which uncertainty is shaped by an acceptance process expected to take at least two weeks, but which goes through several of distinct stages. Beginning with an initial referral to an appropriate local

authority identified as having adequate resources to support the refugee/s, there are delays whilst affordable, sustainable accommodation is sourced, and health checks are completed. The 'case' then moves to a final approval stage, and visa and travel arrangements put in place by the UK Home Office. Following that, the pre-arrival planning stage is expected to take a further six weeks. In total therefore, there is a minimal eight week waiting period from the time an initial referral is made to the final arrival date. These stages therefore control the early portion of the resettlement journey for refugees arriving to the UK. Given that many refugees find themselves in precarious circumstances, the conditions that generate the need for flight in the first instance, this waiting for futures yet to be realised still impacts upon them in significant ways (Sanyal, 2018).

Refugees arriving through resettlement schemes experience periods of delays and uncertainty throughout the 12-month allocation of support but more so within the first few weeks. Part of a resettlement workers' role is to provide guidance to help refugees register with and access services. Refugees need to be able to access schools, financial support, healthcare services, and employment as early as possible. Interviews provide several powerful examples where refugees within resettlement schemes face temporal borders whilst accessing services. In the extract below, Michael remarks on the difficulties refugees experience during extensive periods of waiting and uncertainty.

> There are things like [Universal Credit] where that time period extends, you need differing evidence, IDs, which people don't get straight away. You have this period to wait and then you have to wait another period once you've applied to be able to get anything (Michael).

In the UK, Universal Credit (UC) is a means-tested benefit scheme responsible for providing social security payments to those in need of welfare support. It is the main income source for new arrival refugees whose arrival has been facilitated by resettlement schemes. UC applications can only be made upon arrival, and there is a requirement to provide extensive information to support the application (like proof of identification). Although they are provided with one-off cash payments of £200 per person, this is the only support available until these benefit claims are met, or employment is found. Thus, access to financial support to meet necessary living costs and the urgent needs of resettlement refugees on arrival can be considerably delayed by the UC application process. Indeed, lengthy processing times within this system are further complicated by a wait of up to five weeks for the first UC payment after the claim is approved. Resettlement workers' experiences reflect the difficulties these time-consuming procedures create for persons seeking support—problems exacerbated by an increasing reliance on web-based technologies that are difficult to navigate, alien, and ostracising for newly arrived refugees, as for other economically disadvantaged societal groups:

> Applying for UC you must wait five weeks and even though they get some funds to start with to help them out People are wondering how they are going to manage and then the difficulties with being able to access it, because it's an online system (Georgia).

In terms of access to employment, resettlement refugees face comparable issues that confront other migrant workers in precarious and low-paid labour markets (Nobil Ahmad, 2008). All of this taken together therefore generates considerable anxieties for recent arrivals trying to cope with a range of new realities, and a very real state of insecurity and precarity (Clayton and Vickers, 2019).

Across all interviews, language was one of the most significant barriers to resettlement, and is a significant source of concern for refugees themselves:

> It'll take more than 12-months for people to learn a language and clients have said to me, "if I could speak English, I wouldn't need you" (Georgia).

Funding is provided to organisations that are contracted to support refugees to access English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes to tackle linguistic barriers. Supporting new arrival refugees with obtaining access to ESOL is therefore integral to resettlement workers' roles. Additionally, public services are expected to dedicate portions of funding to interpreter services. Despite this, language continues to generate uncertainty for refugees, partially due to policy makers' timescales, which operationalizes singular, universally applied models and structures, which are often a poor fit in meeting refugees' diverse needs. The provision of ESOL and interpreters is often inadequate, especially in instances where individuals are illiterate or have poor language proficiencies in their first language. Despite policy emphasis on language acquisition to facilitate 'successful' resettlement—and expectations that refugees will learn English and so is able to access labour markets effectively in the future—the dominant linear temporality that shapes provision works against its own objectives. Once more, the impact is felt most by refugees themselves:

> We come across clients who are illiterate in their own language who cannot read and write their own language, so they struggle a lot (Mahir).

Resettlement workers interviewed also noted the unreliability of interpreter services which creates additional uncertainties for refugees (O'Donnell et al., 2007). This was especially the case when resettlement workers are not present which significantly increased the risk that refugees' needs will not be met by interpreters. Combined with tendencies to shift responsibility for language learning onto refugee themselves, within fixed temporal limits of the supports provided, service providers become (or likely remain) inaccessible if they lack the appropriate provision needed to support refugees. This can adversely impact distinct dimensions of the refugee's resettlement journey, foundering on the rocks of confusion and delay, when putting into place simple, practical measures—attuned to the multifarious timescales of need—could help solve many of these problems:

> They will have tried to book an interpreter and the interpreter doesn't turn up or cancel quite quickly. There should be some fall-back position, where they can phone to explain what has happened. Accessibility is a huge thing for people (Michael).

The inconsistencies of interpreter services make them an unreliable source of language support. Time delays, cancellations, and rescheduling of appointments

because of a dearth of interpreter provision is combined with miscommunication that, in health services for example, can have detrimental consequences for refugee patients:

> Somebody in their first couple of weeks they'd had, an abscess removed from their back and they had to go to the hospital and they did not provide an interpreter. They used Google Translate and what they wanted to say… was "change the dressings every day" and what Google Translate said was "change your clothes every day" (Georgia).

The close link drawn by policy makers between language acquisition and assimilation as an end goal are also internalised by refugees themselves. However, the temporal constraints and unsuitability of provision often mean that this marker of 'integration' raises unrealistic expectations, and disappointment as a felt experience on the part of the resettled refugee:

> Integration to them might be quite different to the integration that we see; how different I'm not entirely sure. It might be for them that they're able to speak English. However, you need to reiterate that "it's a new language you can't take it within 9 months and if you can't speak it, it doesn't mean you aren't welcomed, or you shouldn't have friends" (Ameera).

Uncertain Futures

The prevailing political climate in the UK significantly impacted on those fleeing the wholesale destruction of the Syrian civil war. The 2016 'Brexit' referendum vote, that ultimately saw the UK leave the EU, was the culmination of longer-term sociopolitical tensions in Britain, and left a divisive environment in its wake (Clarke & Moss, 2021). Throughout, migration, asylum, and borders provided sharp and contentious foci for rancorous debates and terrains on which ideas about the future of Britain's place in the world were played out (Morris, 2019; Tyler, 2013, 2020). In the longer-term this should be seen in the context of a migration system forged in the collapse of empire and the 'desire to control the entry of racialised and dispossessed former colonial peoples' (Griffiths & Yeo, 2021, p.524. See also El-Enany, 2020). Economic crisis and biting austerity policies that followed the 2008 financial crash the change from a Labour to first a Coalition and then a stand-alone Conservative Government, shaped the increasingly confrontational prism through which migration, refugees and asylum seekers were officially viewed. This too, was reflected in the experiences of those working with refugees, as Georgia recollects:

> I started working as a case worker in 2004 and refugees were a hot topic. There was money or you could get money from additional projects, we got to do lovely work, around integration, development and integration and it's gone. There's no money there and there are still charities and funds supporting asylum seekers and refugees that fund projects, but not in the same way.

In comparison to the early 2000s, this decline in public funding had significant negative impacts on the quality and availability of support for refugees and asylum seekers. This was one direct consequence of austerity measures that were enacted under the leadership interests of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010–2015) and entrenched by the Conservative government that followed and (at the time of writing) remains in power. The government's approach to managing immigration was to create a 'hostile environment'—a phrase first employed by then Home Secretary and later Prime Minister Theresa May in 2012 (Kirkup and Winnett, 2012). The proposed 'hostile reception' would be characterised by the criminalisation of mobility and the implementation of restrictive policies that adopted a harsh stance on immigration (Goodfellow, 2019). This was particularly so in relation to asylum seekers, who were increasingly, framed as undocumented migrants. Policies restrict immigration to favourable migrants who are highly educated and skilled whilst seeking to reduce the inward movement of 'others'. The anti-immigration discourses in policy and legislation at this time reflected a growing hostility within public attitudes towards immigration which in turn were evident in the UK press and Brexit debates—playing a key role in the resulting vote to leave the EU (Balch & Balabanova, 2017).

The arrival of those fleeing the life-threatening conflict in Syria and the surrounding areas were also problematized at this crucial time in the UK's political history. The implementation of the 'hostile environment' left refugees and asylum seekers facing multiple uncertainties as their rights became more restricted. Indeed, it was characterised by the incorporation of a range of social services to police and discipline their daily lives, in terms of healthcare, education, and housing (Griffiths & Yeo, 2021). In each policy area, temporal borders increasingly framed the lived experiences of refugees and asylum seekers. With their movement suspended in a variety of ways (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013), their possible futures also became dependent on the oscillating, ideological, and temporal changes of a right-wing political leadership feeding unachievable populist fantasies (Browning, 2019, O'Toole, 2018). Once more, refugees and asylum seekers found themselves at an anxious intersection of their own biographic time and that of policy and governance (Baas & Yeoh, 2019).

This is the political environment within which the resettlement workers have also supported refugees and asylum seekers by sourcing opportunities to advocate for their needs. They have arranged and facilitated meetings between refugees and Members of Parliament to highlight issues faced by refugees from their perspective. However, resettlement workers expressed uncertainty toward the ways future changes will materialise for refugees.

> They've listened, and they are making available more funding for educating refugees, but how that will trickle down to the reality is yet to be seen. We are making headways (Godwin).

The charged political environment and the vying imagined temporalities of belonging and exclusion in post-Brexit worlds have placed uncertainty at the heart of the UK's resettlement process, both for refugees themselves and for resettlement workers. Political projects, rooted in appeals to re-imagined pasts that

decontextualize the negative effects of empire on decolonised peoples, and wars of more recent vintage, cast a long shadow on imagined futures (El-Enany (2020), Sanghera, 2021). The restrictive boundary demarcation of who belongs, who is included in re-envisioned futures, and from whom human rights should be denied, has mainstreamed previously marginal calls for an end to longstanding international legal commitments to asylum and a sanctuary from harm for the most vulnerable (Dorling & Tomlinson, 2020). The playing out of these imagined temporalities has very practical and everyday policy outcomes too. For some of its most devoted supporters at least, the recent introduction of the Illegal Migration Bill is embedded in the vision of a future point when the rules of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) may no longer apply to a UK still busy 'taking back control' (Syal & Stacey, 2023).[4]

Likewise, the idea of a 'Global Britain' that is in the business of fundamentally redefining what its global relationships will be (and explicitly on the grounds of the right to seek refugee protection in the UK), already legitimises an on-going squeeze on resources needed to meet the needs of those in flight from danger. If access to funding fluctuates that it impacts the quality of refugee supports then it is unclear whether the resettlement process will improve, remain the same or further decline. For resettlement workers, the need for more positive views about immigration generally, and of refugees and asylum seekers in particular, is critical to underscore calls to improve the distribution of resources to refugee and asylum supports, and to create shared realities grounded in inclusivity and rights.

Discussion and Conclusions

While temporality is largely overlooked in UK resettlement processes and political spheres, our analysis illuminates substantive confluences in time regimes that are imbued in policy and the everyday lived experiences of refugees and support workers This lack of synchronicity re-entrenches inequalities, situational injustices and lack of societal awareness about the biographical experiences of asylum seekers and refugees before leaving their home countries and the everyday practices of surviving in UK resettlement systems (Fisher et al., 2022; Stewart, 2005). Moreover, prolonged periods of being 'in limbo' in resettlement schemes, further embeds 'us' and 'them' power hierarchies which were pivotal to Brexit debates, reinforcing overly sanitised, romanticised social imaginaries of Britishness which are severely at odds with the heterogeneity of refugees lived experiences and ultimately influenced people's decisions to 'Vote Leave' in 2016 (Clayton & Vickers, 2019; El-Enany, 2020; Goodfellow, 2019). As evidenced in this paper, notions of Britishness are extremely complex relating to notions of nationhood, political tensions and social anxieties.

[4] Denounced by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as amounting to an 'asylum ban', the Illegal Migration Bill, introduced by the UK Government in March 2023, allows for the removal of anyone who arrives in the UK irregularly and prevents them applying for asylum whatever their circumstances (cited in Syal and Stacey, 2023).

However, the temporal dimensions of identity in relation to Brexit, which are hitherto underexplored, sheds new light upon the centrality of time to theoretical and empirical analyses of power specifically in relation to the prevalence of colonial histories in British politics, which are living histories, embedded in societal and policy responses to asylum seekers. We therefore recommend that future research agendas on Brexit and asylum-seeking accord much greater consideration to time cultures/regimes and the renegotiation of identity and that contemporary policies must also embrace the nuanced character of identity reconstruction.

As evident in this paper, greater appreciation of time as a non-linear phenomenon offers fruitful conceptual and methodological avenues, 'going deep' into the lived realities of everyday life in UK (and international) asylum systems (Clayton & Vickers, 2019; Cwerner, 2001). While the politicisation of time is accorded emphasis in research (Griffiths et al., 2013), greater societal and political appreciation of the operationalization of multiple time regimes is required to appreciate the challenges of forging novel life paths when living in a new country. This is important for greater political understanding of nuanced, contextual time cultures that are routinely observed by different ethnic groups, which simultaneously relate to and are legitimised in religious beliefs, language, and behavioural conventions, thus showing how time as a multidimensional concept, relates to individual biographies and collective experiences. In conceptual terms, the paper draws particular attention to the ways in which the 'imagined temporalities' of past and future intersect and shape the prospects of belonging and exclusion for refugees, asylum seekers (and migrants more generally) both now and in the future.

Although limited in sample size, our research provides further evidence of the multiple temporalities in asylum processes, those which are enshrined in policies, within support services by refugees and resettlement workers that are deeply cultural and learned across the life course (Griffiths, 2014). Essentially, there are no singular definitions of time in operation in asylum systems; rather engaging with multiple and imagined temporalities generates much more complex, richer understandings of how official time regimes are legitimised, and/or how fusion of various time regimes and routines impact on cultural learning uncovering nuances in time cultures is important to fostering a deeper understanding of how asylum seeking individuals and families settle in the UK, which moves beyond overly simplified definitions of culture shock and assimilation (Griffiths, 2014; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013).

As Clayton and Vickers (2019) suggest, the non-linear character of time illuminates the futility of conceptual approaches to cultural assimilation, adaptation and integration, underlining instead that a significant conceptual shift is needed. Static theoretical approaches which emphasise linear understandings of acculturation and culture shock cannot capture the nuances of people's everyday experiences of coping and surviving in new cultural contexts. Current UK policy, which embeds and operationalizes these categorisations, must adopt fluid conceptualisations of time which illuminate the contested character of temporality, the heterogeneity of asylum seekers', refugees and support workers' experiences, and agency. Approaches to cultural learning that emphasise fluidity, knowledge sharing and underlying cultural assumptions, would go further in their ability to capture the negotiated aspects of everyday human experience.

Research focused on situated cultural learning of asylum seekers (de Wal Pastoor, 2017) (the dynamic nature of their everyday experiences, knowledge-exchange, and tacit knowledge that regulates everyday communicative conventions) offers greater scope in recalibrating social and political debates towards the layered and sensory dimensions of asylum seeker and support workers' lives. Moreover, such approaches are important for policy in recognising that adaptation is not an arbitrary process; instead, learning to live in a new country is a lifelong and highly individualised endeavour and is irreducible to the short to medium-term, which is the predominant time culture enshrined in UK policy. This time culture severely undermines human rights and requires urgent redress by government. Incorporating cultural learning approaches which recognise the interconnections between individuals' experiences and broader social structures is significant for understanding the dynamism of cultural experiences, values and knowledge cultures.

The development of more biographical research on asylum seekers and refugees in the UK and internationally which explores the richness of everyday experiences further generates important horizons into the multiplicity of time regimes, socially anticipated regularities and micro-interactions (Valenta, 2010; Lechner, 2019; Thunborg et al., 2021). This is significant to capturing the complexities of everyday lives lived in asylum illuminating how cultural learning happens across the life course and sheds light into the complex meanings of everyday experiences. Such studies are significant in terms of not only what they offer to extant research but to improved support, cultural understanding, and for the embedding of human rights in asylum seeking processes and services. Significantly, a closer incorporation of life course approaches into policies would contribute to fruitful understandings of biographical ruptures and 'turning points' which are hitherto politically under-acknowledged aspects of asylum seeker's lives.

Qualitative research is largely negated in UK policy; it is often dismissed as subjectivity in a largely centralised policy process that prioritises linearity and delimits opportunities for genuine participation (Bloch, 2000). More opportunities for qualitative researchers, for service providers and asylum-seeking families in participatory spheres is urgently needed; however, government needs to redress largely static understandings of time and 'staged' approaches to human experiences which constitute overly prescriptive ways of envisioning asylum seekers and refugees' lives (Baas & Yeoh, 2019; Griffiths et al., 2013). Greater space needs to be accorded to research on imagined temporalities and futures in policy spheres which further shows the complexity of policymakers' experiences including biographical ruptures agency, and relationships. This is an important theme identified through the course of this research, if only dealt with briefly here, that we believe opens up considerable possibilities for future work. In the UK, fulfilling human rights commitments to persons seeking asylum, requires not only greater recognition to research on temporal practices but necessitates deeply seated cultural shifts in (often stigmatising) assumptions and knowledge that underpin policy processes with regard to time and its significance to human rights (Goodfellow, 2019; Tyler, 2020). Given that temporal regularities are largely tacit and (mostly) resist verbalisation, this is not easy to achieve. However, offering more pronounced spaces to social scientists, asylum seekers and resettlement workers generates significant opportunities potentially

leading to policy gains including societal 'buy-in', legitimacy and better decision-making. Relationship-building between services and researchers offers promise and in situations where such ties already exist, these need to be leveraged to attain greater legitimacy in policy spheres. While research into time, culture, and negotiated temporalities is significant, researchers, resettlement workers, government, and asylum-seeking communities must work together to enhance the importance accorded to temporal and sensory experiences in UK policy arenas.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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