

## Leverhulme Doctoral Scholarships Programme for Interdisciplinary Resilience Studies (PIRS) University of Southampton

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RECRUITMENT CYCLE for studentships starting: October 2024

### SUPERVISORY TEAM

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### STUDENTSHIP PROJECT TITLE

**Creating sanctuary: resilience & arts-based initiatives in asylum seeker settings**

### OVERVIEW

Blending anthropology, arts-based practice, cultural studies and psychology, this participatory research engages in, reflexively appraises, and critically evaluates creative and arts-based methods carried out in sanctuary initiatives for refugees or asylum seekers which enable creative expressions of the experience of adversity and positive adaptation, reflective of resilience.

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### SUMMARY

Drawing on expertise in anthropology, creative arts, cultural studies and psychology, this project explores the nexus between sanctuary seeking, mental health and the arts. To date there is little comparative research on the work of arts organisations and creative projects in generating benefits for displaced people. This project will explore what is still a novel and experimental field.

It sets out to identify and describe the landscape of refugee arts initiatives to map its range, ambition and impact and the ways mental health and wellbeing are addressed within it. Through focused ethnographic case studies, the project will comparatively examine the cultural meanings and expressive perceptions of psychological health and resilience in relation to sanctuary. The project will endeavour to gauge the potential of creative and arts-based practices in improving mental health and wellbeing of refugee populations. For stakeholder impact the project will curate a small exhibition and workshop emerging from the research.

The student will develop their research skills and theoretical understanding informed by practice across disciplines. Interdisciplinary training will be given in ethical ethnographic practice, critical and creative curation, and psychological evaluation and inference-making by a multilingual specialist team led by Everett (Winchester School of Art), Armbruster (Anthropology/Language) co-convenor of the Debating Ethnography research group, board member of the Centre for Transnational Studies and founding member of the University of Sanctuary group and Kreppner (Psychology) member of the Centre for Innovations in Mental Health. The supervisory team will encourage the student to make connections between the concepts/ideas/perspectives.

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## **PROJECT CONCEPT**

### *Rationale*

In recent years initiatives of refugee sanctuary have grown, worldwide. Typically, they involve civil society, third sector, educational, faith and cultural organisations that create spaces of welcome for migrants whose lives are affected by what observers have called the slow violence of asylum (Darling 2009; Mayblin 2020). Sanctuary initiatives seek to mitigate the structural exclusion of this migrant population and challenge anti-immigrant discourses. As sanctuary practices provide vital structures of support, particularly in the context of crumbling welfare states, they also contend with the negative effects of what has become known, at least in the UK, as a hostile environment. Associated with state policies of deterrence, dispersal, detention, and deportation this includes measures such as the ban on employment and limiting access to healthcare for people seeking asylum.

Our project takes its departure from sanctuary as multifaceted. We posit that sanctuary is both productive of resilience as well as constrained by orders of legal, social, and economic exclusion. The research will explore sanctuary as resilience, that is as a form of adaptation to a challenging environment of marginality and precariousness in which practices of welcome, care, and hospitality do not simply exist but must be actively crafted. To home in on sites in which sanctuary is given meaning experientially, interactionally, and materially, we focus on participatory arts spaces.

Over the last decade, arts organisations have started working with displaced populations to promote inclusion through the arts. A recent report by a

pioneering foundation in the field stated that these organisations are typically small and funding-constrained yet strive for strong civil society and social justice principles and utilise a variety of art forms to generate benefits for people from refugee backgrounds (Baring Foundation & Counterpoints Arts 2023). What is more, they recognise the mental health burden that hostile asylum regimes and pre-arrival experiences can produce and see unique potential in the arts to build resilience and promote agency in adverse circumstances. High incidents of post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation among refugee populations have long been recognised by support communities (e.g. Refugee Council) and in psychological research (Fazel et al., 2005).

Taking insights from anthropology, art-practice, cultural studies, and psychology in our approach to resilience this research explores the nexus between sanctuary seeking, mental health and the arts. To date there is little comparative research on the work of arts organisations and creative projects in generating benefits for displaced people and this project will explore what is still a novel and experimental field.

#### *Key objectives*

The proposed interdisciplinary approach to resilience starts from a baseline psychological definition of resilience as a dynamic process wherein individuals display positive adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity or trauma (Luthar et al., 2000). It involves, further, that resilience is not a personal trait but intersubjectively produced, a process in time and place, and culturally embedded. As scholarship in the combined fields argues, resilience is not easily measured as a set of quantifiable attributes but inferred from evidence of narration, storytelling, and observation. Creative arts spaces offer platforms in which such social embeddings and cultural meanings of resilience can come to the fore (Lionis & Tsivopoulos 2022). Organisers emphasize refugee arts programmes in their empowering potential: foregrounding participants as agents rather than victims (a label often associated with refugees); enabling cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness; nurturing collaboration and co-creation and generating novel routes of self-expression. This notion of sanctuary as praxis grounds four main objectives:

- To identify and describe the broad landscape of refugee arts initiatives with a view to mapping its range, ambition and impact and the ways in which mental health is addressed within it;
- To comparatively examine and identify the cultural meanings and expressive perceptions of psychological health and resilience through two to three ethnographic case studies;
- To achieve a better understanding of the potential of arts practices (the what and the how) in improving the mental health of refugee populations;
- To curate a small exhibition and workshop at the Winchester School of Art or associated galleries, emerging from the research.

#### *Methods*

The overall methodological approach is qualitative, notably ethnographic, particularly apt because discretion and trust are fundamental when interlocutors may be vulnerable or suspicious. We will not include arts therapy as a distinct professional field. Our aim is to incorporate arts organisations that work with or have developed specialisms in working with asylum seekers and refugees, and refugee organisations that use the arts. Interviews and participant observation with practitioners and organisations underpin this research. An effort will be made to include different geographical areas and a variety of settings.

The researcher will scope opportunities for conducting fieldwork in two or three sites. Those sites will situate the creative, empathetic, and ethnographic exploration of a select number of art-based projects in-depth over an extended period. Finally, and with support from the supervisory team, the student will curate a manageable exhibition as part of a sanctuary event at the University. It will showcase select project studies and artworks and bring together research participants creating benefit for the organisations in terms of networking and exchanging best practice. In a bid to integrate more strongly methods between Anthropology, Art-practice, Cultural Studies and Psychology, this research will track the interdisciplinary skills and practices developed in the research, evaluate with interlocutors the outcomes generated, and reflect on the challenges met. The research will be reflexive, as a function of participatory research through which researcher and researched will adapt to existing structures and contribute to the creation of new initiatives.

#### *Wider implications*

The project will create knowledge of sanctuary-making as bound up with a praxis of resilience among asylum seekers through creative practices. It will enhance our understanding of the arts as media for therapeutic processes of post-traumatic healing in intercultural spaces. This has value for those seeking sanctuary and for the enhancement of societal wellbeing and its capacity to build resilience and inclusive communities. The project will contribute to our collective shaping of society notably through co-production, co-creation, and co-curation as both research and human method to strengthen empathetic communication and cultures of hospitality. It will create benefit for participating arts organisations through feeding back research and enhancing visibility.

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#### **Contribution to interdisciplinary resilience studies:**

The project will contribute to resilience research that looks beyond the individual as an isolated biological or psychological entity. It seeks to explore what resilience can mean in a context of cross-cultural community practice, participation and co-creation, and will take account of the work that nurtures such practice. We therefore also envisage an enhanced understanding of a) the role of civic/charity/arts activism in forging resilience, and b) the resources needed for this labour to thrive.

Collectively we combine specialism in the ethics and methods of ethnography specifically with asylum seekers (Armbruster), curation of multilingual, transcultural and intergenerational postcolonial themes in migration (Everett), and cutting-edge work on mental health following early life adversity and participatory research with asylum-seeking young people (Kreppner). Methodologically plural, our supervision team is expert in empathetic ethical observation, creative and critical curation and rigorous scientific evaluation; the interpretivism of our anthropological practice jostling with data-led empiricism. This positive interplay creates productive tension in tracking and tracing arts-based initiatives in sanctuary seeking settings as generative of resilience processes and will both push the boundaries and provide fertile supervisory support for doctoral research in interdisciplinary resilience studies.

Participation and knowledge production is key to this project and so too is it integral to our practice across Anthropology, Art-practice, Cultural Studies and Psychology. This engagement has reflexive purchase within interdisciplinary resilience studies at the level of creative practices in sanctuary-seeking settings while at the same time harnessing theoretical innovation emanating from Anthropology, Arts-based practice, Cultural Studies, and Psychology.

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**Please list and describe any specific/additional technical training or support to undertake and successfully deliver this project.** *Note that students recruited into this programme will undertake a bespoke training curriculum. Students and their supervisory teams will also identify generic skills gaps to address through training courses offered by the University's Doctoral College.*

- Empathetic ethical observation: to engage sensitively with vulnerable populations, avoid and manage conflict and protect yourself.
  - Creative and critical curation: to plan and implement novel arts-based methods and research output for example through audio-visual media and animation.
  - Rigorous scientific evaluation: to think with organisations and art-based initiatives about tracking behaviour and perception for example before and after undertaking artistic practice.
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