

The Context of Clinical and Casework Posts at the Baobab Centre

The Baobab Centre works with young asylum seekers and refugees the majority of whom arrived in the UK as unaccompanied minors. All have experienced either or both organized and inter-personal violence in their home countries and increasing numbers have also experienced domestic violence within their families. Most have experienced a difficult journey into exile in the UK during which some have experienced further abuse from local police, military officials, and local citizens, or from the people traffickers who have been paid by family members to keep young people safe and protected.

All of the young people in Baobab's community experience significant difficulties in the UK in accessing high quality involved care and destitution support, housing, education, adequate health care and asylum. After their experiences of violence and loss and numerous unplanned changes in their lives many of our young community members' mental health and development is further negatively impacted by the UK asylum process. This is as a result of both the long waiting time for Home Office responses and the bureaucratic and insensitive Home Office interviews. In these interviews young people are often prevented from thinking clearly due to interviewers rigidly following pro forma questions, this can lead to young people being refused after their substantive interviews. Subsequently young people wait, often for years, in a state of profound uncertainty about their future, young people cannot manage or bear this level of uncertainty without significant costs to their mental health and their development.

Most unaccompanied young asylum seekers suffer specific and particular vulnerabilities including the cluster of symptoms referred to as complex post- traumatic stress disorder. This is a consequence of the interaction of the impacts of the sequence of their overwhelming experiences, in their home countries, on their journeys into exile and in exile in the UK. Most also have significant strengths and resiliencies as well as the capacity to develop new resiliencies. Our aim as an organisation is to help them to acknowledge and to begin to work through their vulnerabilities and to enable them to access old resiliencies that have been suppressed by their traumatic experiences. Baobab also enables our young people to develop new resiliencies and strengths through individual psychotherapeutic, developmental and ego supportive psychotherapeutic work. New resiliencies are also gained through participating as fully as they are able in the life of our non-residential therapeutic community and in parallel or sequentially with life in the community of exile outside our transitional therapeutic community. It is part of our philosophy that key aspects of resilience develop via five key factors: Belonging, Reflection, Agency, Creativity and Community Membership. Our community aims to provide a variety of contexts where these aspects of resilience may develop and flourish.

The young people referred to our centre diverge in age between early adolescence and the mid to late twenties and they have access to our services for as long as they and our clinical team feel is necessary. Most leave to develop independent lives, accessing higher education and work, also building new families, building networks of friends, finding partners and having children. Our community is diverse and composed of young people currently from twenty- nine different countries. Our community is also highly diverse in terms of class and racial background some having participated in primary and secondary education and some having had no education due to war in their home countries or due to deprivation and poverty. We

think that education is an essential resource and have a fund to support the education endeavours of our community members including those who have no access to tertiary education. We have volunteers who teach basic English, Maths and Science.

Our central aim as an organisation is to offer opportunities for both rehabilitation and justice and we do this in five key ways: a) Practical case work support from our senior social worker and her team; b) Offering Individual psychotherapy, and developmental help; c) Participation in group psychotherapy and a variety of group based arts, sports and educational activities including our philosophy discussion group; d) Offering support through the prolonged and bureaucratic asylum system and beyond in terms of accessing destitution funds and housing; e) Encouraging all young people to take part in the life of the Baobab Community, sharing and taking responsibilities and attending our regular community meetings and events. After experiences of sequential traumatisation, young people's development is often stuck at the level of development at which they were functioning when a series of traumatic and overwhelming events took place in their lives. Our aim is that slowly our young community members move from our transitional community to taking part in the life of the community of exile where they can contribute to community life, work and learn and make new and significant relationships and feel free to be themselves.

INTRODUCTION TO OUR MODELS OF WORK

The Baobab Centre for Young Survivors in Exile runs as a non-residential therapeutic community. Being non-residential we are a much looser community than residential therapeutic communities where young people live full time or from non-residential therapeutic - communities with mandatory daily attendance.

It has been our experience, re-enforced by several years of monitoring and evaluation by independent researchers, that young people attending our centre need both our holistic and integrated perspective and the therapeutic input and consequent progressive development that comes from our thinking very carefully and in some detail, about their individual experiences and their needs and then by meeting their needs through prioritising space for reflection and discussion about each member of our community.

The young people in our community have all experienced violence to their bodies usually from adults. This violence might have taken place in their communities perpetrated by citizens or government officials, or from members of their communities in conflict over resources, beliefs, values or power, or in prisons at the hands of government forces or in situations dominated by members of insurgent groups or people traffickers. They have all experienced what we call child and adolescent specific human rights abuses. Many have also observed their parents being brutalised, humiliated, violated, arrested, tortured and murdered. As a consequence our young community members are often mistrustful of others, both peers and adults, and take a long time to begin to be able to share their experiences with others even when they know that others have had similar experiences. Their experiences of human rights abuses are linked with terror, guilt, shame, rage, anxieties and depression. We often engage in philosophical discussions in our staff group and with the young people in different contexts of our work, about the links between privacy, secrecy, honesty, and openness and how much another human needs to know about you. Barriers to sharing personal history and experiences are

linked to certain traditional cultural styles, where parents do not discuss feelings and experiences with their children and further actively discourage their children from talking about feelings as well as to the shame and guilt, fear and confusion always connected to sequential physical, sexual and emotional abuse.

We support young people through the prolonged vicissitudes of the asylum system, often preparing detailed specialist clinical reports that meet the requirements of the courts to support asylum claims for young people who have experienced a series of violent emotional and physical experiences. Our Senior Social worker and her team of caseworkers, work in a very challenging context enabling young people to access Local Authority Care; adequate housing, benefits, education and a GP. We have to work closely with Specialist Asylum Solicitors and Barristers and we also work increasingly with Community Care, Housing and Public law specialists. All young people are allocated an individual clinician who becomes their key worker, advocate, and sometimes substitute parent. We expect a lot from our key workers however, their role is to identify work that needs to be done for the community member in question, not to carry out all this work alone. The key worker should, in discussion with others in our multi-disciplinary child, adolescent and young adult specialist team, identify what needs to be done and ensure through networking and multi-professional meetings that the work is shared, and gets done.

All young people are offered individual psychotherapy and membership of a small group. We run both psychotherapy groups and activity based groups (arts and reflective educational groups and sports based groups) and often make use of outings to build group connections, relationships and identities. We have found that a mixed model of group work is most effective that is one that combines and integrates psychoanalytic, activity based and psycho-social perspectives. Initially classical verbal interpretations can be experienced as intrusive, clarifications and explorations and interpretations in displacement are often acceptable and not rejected. Young people attending our centre will have had unthinkable and unspeakable experiences and non-verbal work through art and music is very helpful for our population.

We see the therapeutic nature of both the working relationship with their individual psychotherapist and different individual relationships with the other adults in our community (clinicians and administrators) and the membership of a small group as central for our work. The third pivot of our therapeutic approach is each young person's developing relationship with the Baobab community both more and less formal, with our regular 6 weekly Community meetings which enable young people (who have been forced to leave their home community) to develop the capacity to trust, to listen and explore ideas and disagreements in a safe context, and with their growing capacities to take and to share responsibilities and engage in discussions in different contexts.

We work with several different clinical models including thinking about individual child, adolescent and young adult centred psychoanalytic psychotherapeutic work; thinking about therapeutic group work; thinking about arts based (art, drama, music and storytelling) verbal and non-verbal work. It is essential, at Baobab for all clinical and casework staff to be able to think about the vicissitudes of child and adolescent development and about the detail of the contexts from which young people have travelled to the UK and their experiences in the UK. Many young people are functioning developmentally, in many areas of their development, at

several years below their chronological age. In this context we have found ways of working rooted in the ideas of child and adolescent psychotherapy and developmental help to be especially fitting in our weekly sessions. This would include working indirectly and in displacement and spending time finding a language for feelings alongside memories and experiences that may seem for some while to be unthinkable and unspeakable. It can take a very long time to build a therapeutic alliance with young people whose trust has been broken and who have experienced significant human rights abuses.

Many young people have little understanding of the detail of the political and social context of their home countries that led to their having to leave their home country and seek asylum in the UK, as well as the complexities of the UK social and asylum systems. The onus is on our staff to try to make sense of these different contexts first for ourselves and later for all our young people. This is not simply social support, but to offer key aspects of substitute parenting, sensitive to individual developmental needs. Individual plans are made as we aim to give all young people the experience of being treated as individuals and with respect and involvement from all our staff.

At Baobab the staff roles are demanding, and there are expectations beyond the job descriptions. Individuals are expected to sometimes be advocates and sometimes to take on the role of substitute carers being involved with individual young people and sharing this role with others. The priority at Baobab is that we keep our young people centrally in mind and make a great deal of time to discuss their needs. We aim to recruit staff who are kind and generous, creative and flexible, resourceful and rigorous.

All staff have access to supervision and support in terms of their role as well as managerial supervision. Work of new Staff is reviewed after six months of probation and then each member of staff has access to an annual appraisal where we can discuss areas of development and learning.