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Caring and building friendships in the UK's asylum system

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Abstract

To care and feel cared for are considered fundamental to what makes us human, and what enables us to live and thrive in this world. Yet for the UK's asylum-seeking population who is living with uncertainties for the future, care appears absent. In such contexts, it is imperative to understand how care is enacted, experienced, and valued amongst spaces and people often considered to be care-less. Drawing on data collected in four collaborative photographic workshops and photo elicitation interviews with asylum seekers and refugees (ASRs) (N: 7), this study aims to gain insight into how ASRs in the UK care and feel cared for and their relative ability to forge friendships during their migration journey. We show how their relationship to caregiving and care-receiving changes over time and is deeply influenced by asylum policies and the refugee experience more generally. Responding to feminist scholars' calls to disrupt the normative assumptions about how and between whom care is exchanged, this article highlights the diversity of friendships forged while on the move and seeking asylum as well as the caring practices emerging in situations of precarity, the pervasive impacts of the hostile environment on disrupting and distorting such caring relationships, and cautious but agentic and caring ways that ASRs seek to navigate the ambiguities of friendships in hostility. In doing so, the article provides an important counter-narrative to the dominant portrayal of ASRs as passive recipients of care, by highlighting how their way to approach care and friendship varies across time and circumstances.

Keywords: Asylum-seeker, Refugee, Ethics of care, Friendship, United Kingdom

Introduction

Care, both giving and receiving, is central to what makes us human—to how we exist and move through the world, how we relate to others, and to our sense of self-worth and purpose (Tronto, 1995). Yet within the UK's current socio-political climate, care appears to be increasingly elusive and for asylum seekers and refugees (ASRs), this absence of care appears more acute than ever. In the increasingly hostile immigration environment, which over the last decade has sought to control, criminalise and deport migrants and limit their access to basic housing, health and social care, ASRs occupy a particularly precarious position in the UK, caught between intensifying austerity and dwindling social welfare and NGO support (Allsopp et al., 2014; Darling, 2016; Mayblin et al., 2020). Their lives are largely characterised by protracted insecurity, poverty, social

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isolation, fear and fleeting social connections (Bloch & McKay, 2016; Chase & Allsopp, 2020). The implications of this hostile environment on ASRs' everyday lives, social relations and wellbeing are profound. In such contexts of adversity and austerity, social networks and friendships can prove vital not only for exchanges of emotional, material and practical support that help people cope with everyday struggles, but also as important affective relationships that can help sustain or restore a sense of place and meaning in life in otherwise hostile circumstances (see Kathiravelu & Bunnell, 2018). Yet, with the partial exception of family and kin relations (e.g., Kallio & Häkli, 2019), these informal networks of care have largely been overlooked. Instead, research has tended to focus on formal provisions of care, particularly within healthcare spaces and where ASRs are largely portrayed as passive recipients of care (e.g. Aspinall & Watters, 2010; Darling, 2011).

In this article, we move away from the analyses viewing ASRs as recipients of institutional care. Drawing on participatory photographic methods and semi-structured interviews with seven ASRs in the United Kingdom (UK), we bring insights into ASRs' subjective experiences of friendship and caregiving/receiving against the backdrop of British asylum policies and the refugee experience more generally. As such, we follow recent work in refugee studies that focuses on how ASRs (re)build friendship networks post-displacement (e.g. van Liempt & Staring, 2020; Amrith, 2018; Lubit 2022; Ziersch et al., 2023). In focusing on ASRs' subjective and affective experiences of friendships and practices of care, we pay close attention to how caring practices emerge in situations of precarity created by the asylum system, acknowledging that the formations of friendships and practices of care change across temporalities and circumstances (Kathiravelu & Bunnell, 2018). We show that friendships and care-practices are important for ASRs' material and emotional wellbeing without however romanticising these relations, which can also be exploitative and sources of stress. In doing this, we highlight the challenges and ambiguities of care within friendships and instead demonstrate the inherent complexities that exist in social relations of friendship.

After briefly outlining elements of the UK asylum system that impact ASRs' ability to forge friendships and practice care, we engage with the research on care ethics and friendship. We argue that friendship and care-giving is a fruitful lens through which we can shed the light on caring practices (and therefore agency) of those represented as being mere recipients of care, such as ASRs. In this, we acknowledge how care and friendship are not inherently positive but fraught with power inequalities that actors try to navigate. We move on to present the data and methods of analysis, explain the added value of creative methodologies and discuss the research's limitations. We divide the empirical sections in two parts. First, we detail the typologies of friendships described by the participants and highlight how the asylum system impacts on their ability to forge these relations. Second, we examine how the participants practice and reciprocate caregiving, how these practices differ depending on the type of friend they engage with, and how the asylum system affects these practices. We demonstrate that ASRs engage with a diversity of caring relationships and, though accounts of ambivalence and fragility of friendship exist, their friendships are not defined by them. This underlines the need to acknowledge not only the limits to care, but also the new possibilities for care that can emerge in situations of precarity.

The British context of asylum

To reduce simplistically defined economic 'pull factors', successive British governments have restricted asylum seekers' welfare and labour rights, contributing to an environment which has had demonstrable negative material and mental consequences for ASRs (Allsopp et al., 2014; Darling, 2016; Mayblin et al., 2020; Targarona Rifa & Dona' 2021). Asylum seekers are not eligible for mainstream welfare benefits, and they are prohibited to work.[1] They instead have to apply for financial support set at £39.63 per person per week at the time of the research (2021). This sum is calculated using data on the spending habits of the lowest 10% income group in the UK, whose income is 60% lower than the median income. The amount barely covers one's minimum expenses and does not reflect asylum seekers' specific circumstances, e.g. frequent travel costs related to their asylum claims or lack of storage space in shared accommodation to store cheaper bulk food items (Mayblin et al., 2020). After been allocated to temporary accommodation, ASRs are moved into longer-term, hostel-style accommodation managed by the Home Office or private contractors. These accommodations are offered to asylum seekers on a no-choice basis after 35 days (Gower, 2021). Given the shortage of long-term accommodations, however, they are increasingly being hosted in overcrowded contingency accommodation such as hotels and former military barracks. Asylum dispersals tend to happen to areas of existing social deprivation, economic stagnation and high unemployment, which increases ASRs' feelings of isolation and marginalization (Darling, 2016). The experiences of forced displacement and financial precarity contribute to what Grace et al. (2018) call 'violent uncertainty', exacerbated by increasingly long waiting times for the asylum decision, where every day focuses on survival and difficult choices are made between food, transport, medication and mobile phone data (Phillimore and Cheung 2021).

The hostile reception met by ASRs in the UK reflects politicians' attempts to socially control them and appease some public perceptions of this population as potential social, economic and cultural threats to the country. Together with these negative connotations of ASRs, are others that tend to picture refugees as helpless victims in need of governmental or non-governmental support (Ghorashi, 2005). This image "reinforces paternalistic relations between those who need and those who provide asylum" (Kirkwood, 2017: 122) and dehumanises ASRs. Dispersal; lack of material resources; stress, trauma and poor mental health; and images of ASRs as threats or victims cloak their agency in responding to precarity and engage in, support, and care for others, which instead become evident if the frame of analysis focuses on the ubiquity of care and on friendship.

Situating care: caring ethics and friendship

Care practices are commonly seen as taking place in the private sphere of daily gendered household activities and interactions that are greatly undervalued in many societies. Feminist scholars working within the framework of care ethics challenge this reading of care. Instead, they see care-giving and -receiving not as individual dispositions but as relational practices emerging through the interactions and exchanges we have with others (Tronto, 1995). As such, care ethics emphasizes concepts of relationality and interdependence as fundamental to our shared experiences of being human and points out how care practices are ever-present in everyone's lives (Bartos, 2019).

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[1] Asylum seekers who are still in the system after one year are allowed access a limited number of occupations.

To see care as ubiquitous does not mean that it is unilaterally positive, however. Rather, care is a "contested terrain" (Narayan, 1995: 136) fraught with racialised and gendered power inequalities between care-givers and -receivers. Attention to these inequalities enables researchers to better understand how social and institutional structures enable and disable one's conditions to care (Hankivsky, 2014). This is clear in contexts of asylum where discourses and practices expressing sympathy, care, and concern for ASRs are often entwined with taken-for-granted notions about nation-states' right to exclude others through policies of expulsion and border control or structurally violent reception policies. Power inequalities between care-givers and -receivers in the context of asylum can turn sympathy for ASRs into paternalism whilst at the same time undermining practices for social change (Nightingale et al., 2017). Attentiveness to power inequalities is important as we analyse ASRs' care practices and the role of non-governmental (NGO) refugee organisations in enabling those. Some initiatives and organisations are attentive and responsive to the needs of their beneficiaries. They strive to create spaces where care-giving and receiving (temporarily) flows between ASRs and those involved in the organisation (Rast & Ghorashi, 2018) or where ASRs find tools to manage their precarious situation and traumatic past so that their ability to forge relationships is greater. These spaces can challenge dominant discourses of passivity and victimhood related to ASRs and have the potential to bring some degree of political change. Yet, NGOs are never void of power hierarchies and involve "layers of dependency and implicit expectations between refugees and locals" (Younes et al., 2021: 224). Importantly, NGOs' outreach is fundamentally shaped by the existence of state support which, in the British context, has been dwindling after over a decade of austerity policies.

The emphasis on care's relationality is important because it blurs the boundary between care-giver and care-receiver. It enables the expansion of the parameters of caring to include those, like ASRs, who are typically considered passive recipients of (state) care within designated community and healthcare spaces and whose care relations are less visible. This echoes research that re-centres ASRs' agency in exerting control over their own lives despite post-migration precarity (e.g. Ghorashi, 2005; Williams, 2006; Kallio & Häkli, 2019; van Liempt & Staring, 2020). To pay attention to ASRs not just as recipient of (state) care, but also as care-givers sheds light on how their agency is deployed in their daily routines and communal lives in a context of uncertainty and precarity dictated by the asylum system.

Much research on how care is practiced by ASRs tends to focus on relations and obligations that ASRs, and migrants more broadly, might have towards family members (e.g. Kallio & Häkli, 2019; Tiilikainen et al., 2023), thus falling into a "familiar trap" (Bartos, 2019: 770) that gives precedence to the analysis of family relations over others. To avoid this pitfall, and to pay attention to caring relationships beyond family and kin that emerge in the migration journey, scholars have advocated for the analytic relevance of friendship relations (e.g. Kathiravelu & Bunnell, 2018). Friendships have been defined as "a voluntary relationship between two or more people" (Bowlby, 2011: 607) forming a community that "ebbs and flows depending on the context" (Kathiravelu & Bunnell, 2018: 493) and a social space where care can be practiced. A focus on caring practices in friendships rather than within families presents the further advantage of examining care and agency in relations where there are no social expectations to fulfil filial or parental duties. Friendships, as voluntary relations, require the agency of those involved to exist in the first place. The interdependencies created through friendship ties and expressed through care practices are important to ASRs to reclaim respect, to feel useful, in a context that is constructed to be hostile and that tries to strip them of agency. This is relevant in the context of ASRs who might have been separated through their migration journey from important, although potentially oppressive, family relations. While in transit or when in the destination country, ASRs engage with and navigate new social relations which may involve care. These relations have often been considered too fleeting and inconsequential to be meaningful and remain therefore under-analysed (Bunnell et al., 2012). Instead, research has favoured top-level analyses of social networks (e.g. Williams, 2006) and ethnically or geographically defined community relations, often explained by their instrumental value or social capital over other emotional aspects (e.g. Ziersch et al., 2023) or, as mentioned before, of family relations. However, as shown in the burgeoning research on friendship in contexts of asylum (e.g. Williams, 2006; van Liempt & Staring, 2020; Lubit, 2022), shared experiences and identities may form the basis of new relationships where care can flow. In these contexts, caring becomes as a meaningful way of relating to one another and finding a social place in a context of uncertainty and precarity– by feeling embedded, useful and connected.

We do not romanticise the positive sides of friendship and care. Instead, we follow Amrith (2018) who argues that friendship is best understood as a spectrum that reflects varying degrees of proximity and distance between individuals, from intimate friends to acquaintances, without attaching value to the typologies of friendships along the spectrum before empirical examination. As such, friendships can be sources of material and emotional well-being *as well as* “of mistrust, frustration and suspicion, particularly within a migrant context” (Kathiravelu & Bunnell, 2018: 493; see also Amrith, 2018; Landau, 2018). This is particularly poignant in the context of friendship in precarious and alienating contexts, such as the one ASRs in the UK live in. Research on ASRs’ social connections has shown how those are characterised by distrust and suspicion (Bloch & McKay, 2016), fleeting and disrupted connections (Hynes, 2011), and exploitative and unequal sharing exchanges (Waite & Lewis, 2017). This suggests that informal relations might not necessarily prove reliable or preferable sources of care amongst this population. Yet, the relevance of friendship and care is apparent if we move away from a romanticised view of friendships as intrinsically and normatively positive. Rather, friendships are ambivalent relations that can, but are not necessarily, intimate and can also include acquaintances that can provide meaning, order and some degree of assistance whilst also being characterised by suspicion and caution (Amrith, 2018; Kathiravelu & Bunnell, 2018). Attentiveness to the different expressions of friendship, away from the idea of positive solidarities, contributes to a more nuanced understanding of care and interpersonal interactions that enable ASRs to confront rapidly changing and precarious conditions.

Temporalities and context matter in friendships, and people’s circumstances affect their relative ability to forge, maintain and care for friendship. Elements of displacement in the UK impact ASRs' ability to forge and maintain friendships that could bring them a measure of comfort and happiness. Their precarity also affect their ability to navigate and possibly disengage from more exploitative relations. While we recognise the challenges that are part and parcel of friendship and care in contexts of vulnerability, we agree with Kathiravelu and Bunnell (2018) that the lens of friendship nuances researchers' understanding of the practices and meanings of care for the actors involved. It can also open for new understandings of social relations away from taken-for-granted ethnic or family solidarities. Thus, it responds to the call for greater attention on how ASRs actively manage, navigate, and exchange care within their social networks, which are not necessarily ethnically or culturally bound (Chase & Allsopp, 2020; Phillimore et al., 2018). Drawing from the insights that emphasise ASRs' active participation in their social worlds, this study takes a grounded approach that focuses on how ASRs do, experience, and attribute meaning to care in friendships. In doing so, it seeks to respond to Bartos' (2019) call to build care ethics back up through a deliberate and sustained engagement with empirical research.

Materials and methods

In the article, we draw on participatory visual methods in the form of collaborative photographic workshops and on photo-elicitation interviews with seven ASRs. The project was conducted in partnership with a volunteer-run photography group for service-users of a NGO (hereinafter BH) providing specialist mental health, legal, practical, and social support for survivors of interpersonal violence who are seeking asylum in the UK. The research received ethical approval from the University of Sussex SSAR Ethics Committee (Ref nr. ER/MW545/2).

Arts-based methodologies lend themselves well to reduce the objectification of participants experiencing intersecting discriminations (Krause, 2017). With this in mind, the first author (Wardale), together with the photography group coordinator, co-facilitated four workshops (online due to Covid-19 regulations) which aimed to (1) provide time and space for the participants to reflect and illustrate their experiences of friendship and care, (2) think about how (and if at all) they should present these; and (3) use photographs as a method of meaning-making about their experiences of care and friendship. The themes for the workshops were not pre-set. Rather, participants were asked in the first workshop what was important to them about caring in friendships. The identified themes—kindness, appreciation, trust, and showing concern—were prompts for the following workshops. The workshops were fluid and collaborative; participants were given feedback and members were encouraged to share ideas and comment on each other's photographs throughout. Placing emphasis on what the participants do, feel and find value in opened up space for ASRs to express themselves beyond the confines of their ASR identities or histories of trauma. Although upsetting issues did emerge, these were also spaces for care.[2]

Before the final photography workshop, Wardale conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with workshop participants who consented to being interviewed (N:

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[2] Though unable to pay participants individually owing to their legal status, their artwork was showcased in an international online exhibition, titled 'The Strength of Friendship'.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of the participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	In UK since	Legal status
Ricky	Male	Unknown	2017	Asylum Seeker
Freedom	Female	40	2002	Appeal Rights Exhausted
Doyo	Male	49	2015	Asylum Seeker
Kasun	Male	42	2014	Refugee Status
Eni	Female	39	2012	Refugee Status
Ruwanthi	Female	Unknown	Unknown	Refugee Status
Abdul	Male	24	Unknown	Asylum Seeker

7). The interviews lasted between one and two hours. The participants, three women and four men, were aged between early 20 s and late 40 s and had lived in the UK between four and 19 years at the time of the research. They had varying legal statuses: three participants had been granted refugee status, three were seeking asylum, and one, who arrived in the UK in 2002, had Appeal Rights Exhausted (ARE) (see Table 1). The participants are referred to using their chosen pseudonyms, and all other identifying information—including in photographs—has been removed.

The participants' photographs were used as prompts to talk about their experiences of friendship and care. During the interviews, Wardale adopted an inductive approach, focussing particularly on power dynamics and the participants' own narratives to build a picture of care from the ASRs' perspectives. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify: the types of friendship identified by the participants; how they engage in caregiving in friendships; and the degree to which they can exercise agency in these relations. Throughout, we captured how the asylum process might have affected their understandings of friendship and ability to give care to others. The photographs were not analysed, but the participants' interpretations of them were. The images reproduced in this article are therefore not intended to be used as data, but as accompanying illustrations to the interview quotes.

Having recruited participants from the same photography group might entail a self-selection bias in the sample. This is a possible limitation of the research. However, the study is not representative and rather provides an in-depth insight into the intricacies of ASRs' individual experiences of care and friendship. Furthermore, to recruit vulnerable participants from an established group enabled us to have conversations about sensitive issues. We were confident about the participants trusting one another whilst also being well-supported by BH. Therefore, this recruitment strategy, while presenting some drawbacks, minimised harm and distress and maximised benefit to the participants.

Every effort was made to make this a collaborative project, working flexibly around the participants' interests and commitments, using simple terminology, paying attention to group dynamics to ensure quieter members had space to talk and emphasizing that all experiences and all photography were valuable. Yet, no participatory methods are inherently egalitarian, especially where they work across marked inequalities between participants and researcher (Oliveira & Vearey, 2017). Wardale was acutely aware of how her position as a young, white, middle-class educated woman and ex-staff member at BH might influence the participants' engagement. However, the aim was not to 'flatten' inequalities but be reflexive about their implications (Verhallen, 2016). Further, most participants explicitly expressed feeling more comfortable because of her background and their enthusiastic engagement and correcting of her (mis)interpretations of their photography reassured us of this.

Types of friendships

Participants talked about different types of friendships they have been able to forge since emigrating: 'fake' friendships; 'friendly acquaintances'; and 'real', deeper friendships. These characterisations of friendship reflect the inherent complexity of these social relations (Amrith, 2018). They also problematise assumptions that the participants' precarity imposed on them by the asylum system mainly exposes them to exploitative relations. The findings show instead that they engage in a variety of friendships including both instrumental relations and close, emotionally important ones.

'Fake' friends

The participants' vulnerability during their migration journey leaved them exposed to people who they described as 'fake friends'. These were people they had—by their own admission—once mistakenly called friends but who had betrayed, deceived, or taken advantage of them. Most only alluded to such experiences and referred to them in the past. For example, Ricky, a Nigerian asylum-seeker, spoke about his experiences with 'fake friends' while in transit in Italy, a period which he described as "full of desperation and frustration" where he felt "played" and "tricked" by friends. He recounted one occasion when he lent what little money he had to another migrant with whom he shared accommodation and who failed to pay him back:

> *He was just playing with me. And at this point I needed the money, I needed it for myself, and it made me look stupid like I didn't know what I was doing, and it really pissed me off, like what kind of person are you? It really broke my trust, you know.*

Ricky's experiences speak to the limits and fragility of care in contexts of scarcity where betrayal and self-interest as much as solidarity form part of the human experience.

While 'fake friends' did not seem to feature in the participants' lives at the time of the research, they were considered an ever-present risk partly because being in the asylum system made 'fake friends' that little more likely. Freedom, who was ARE and whose solicitor was filing a new asylum application, explained how her vulnerability exposed her to 'fake friends': "with the situation I am in right now, people can promise you things, and you will fall for it, you know". When forced to live under the radar or losing housing after becoming ARE, Freedom had to be open to care from strangers who might turn out to be 'fake friends' because, as Doyo, a Congolese asylum-seeker, put it: "there was no other choice". Their past experiences with 'fake friends' made them wary of trusting and getting too involved with other people. Awareness of 'fake friends' meant that most participants engaged instead with 'friendly acquaintances', described below.

Friendly acquaintances

While past experiences made the participants wary of bonding with new people and generally distrustful towards others, as they waited for their asylum claim they made 'friendly acquaintances', i.e. people they met through circumstances. The level of interaction varied by context. Participants report making 'friendly acquaintances' with other asylum seekers. With them they sometimes exchanged little more than a friendly greeting, as illustrated by Abdul, a young Afghani asylum seeker:

> *In my accommodation there are Kurdish people and Sudanese people. They don't speak good English, I don't speak good English, so everyone just stays in their rooms on their mobiles. [...] The only thing we say is, if they see someone's letter then they can recognise someone's name so they just say 'this is your letter' or 'this is my letter'. We don't speak much more than that.*

Acquaintances like the ones described above provided a temporary escape from isolation but offered little in the way of resources or sense of belonging and were considered meaningful but superficial. As such, these relations are characterised by convenience and instrumentalism, needed in contexts of economic hardship and resource scarcity.

Participants also forged 'friendly acquaintances' with people from church and NGOs. These were more sustained and convivial, if surface-level, interactions. Some participants formed these 'friendly acquaintances' through formal befriending programmes with British citizens. With them, they enjoyed eating out, visiting museums and local parks. These relations enabled valuable exchanges of emotional, material and practical support that provided light-heartedness, as illustrated by Kasun talking about his British 'friendly acquaintances':

> *We just discussed things, talk, I took my camera and took some photos. Kyoto garden – west London, he took me there. Sky garden, the top building, we went there, to the London Museum, Kings Cross, Tate Modern...*

However, participants would not talk about their personal or emotional difficulties with 'friendly acquaintances': "[they're] not someone you can tell something that's bothering you. You don't have the same emotional connection" (Ricky).

To a degree, the participants' experiences reflected the difficulties that other migrants might face in making friends: grappling with different support infrastructures, language barriers, and cultural differences. However, forced relocation, pervasive insecurity, and past experiences of trauma, betrayal, and deceit from 'fake friends' are obstacles to forging friendships that are intrinsically related to the specific vulnerability of seeking asylum. Yet, despite the structural limitations that characterise the participants' lives, they did engage in non-competitive convivial interactions with others. These friendships were relatively superficial and fleeting, but nonetheless meaningful. They provide a sense of warmth, welcome and normality in lives that are disrupted. They also exemplify ASRs' agency in forging friendship networks which might lack full openness but were still rich in reciprocal caregiving.

Fig. 1 Kasun's photo

Close friends

Some participants established deeper friendships, demonstrating how their experiences as asylum seekers in the UK did not always limit their ability to create and maintain meaningful social relations. Close friends were a significant source of emotional support. They were someone the participants could trust and "actually rely on, they understand each other's situation, they have each other's back" as Ricky explained. With these friends, they felt comfortable to be open and honest about their emotional and situational struggles, something that is rarely acknowledged as a source of strength across the refugee literature. For example, the participants spoke about multiple occasions where close friends responded with encouragement after they confided in them about their difficulties. That gave them hope to continue on their asylum journey: "it's a kind of protection", Doyo said.

For one participant, Kasun, a pre-existing friendship provided pivotal emotional support. Kasun fled Sri-Lanka in 2015 and decided to apply for asylum in the UK hoping that his closest friend from university, already in the country, would support him. On arrival, Kasun was detained and his friend and family visited him regularly supporting him emotionally:

> *I was going through all these things, like the PTSD things, I was a sick person, but luckily he came there [detention], and I was talking to him everyday, and he told me not to worry, that he would make sure I got out of there. [...] He is the most special person to me. (Kasun)*

After being released from detention, Kasun's friend took him into his home, cooked for him, bought his clothes, and connected him with a GP, therapy and BH once he realised that Kasun was suffering from severe panic attacks.

Close friends were also important as they encouraged the participants to engage in activities that would distract them from their daily challenges. For instance, when Kasun joined the photography group at BH, his friend gifted him a camera, and when he got refugee status in 2019, his friends' wife bought him an orchid. When asked to take a photograph representing friendship, Kasun chose to take a picture of the camera and a plastic orchid (Fig. 1).

Kasun said about the photo:

> *There is a story behind this photograph. I told my closest friend about joining the […] photography group and straight away he gave me this camera to help me learn. This camera has changed my life I would say – it's helped me overcome my problems, it's been a huge part of my journey of recovery, and I see my friend as central to that journey. The camera is friendship. It motivates me and keeps me inspired. The flower represents the care of my friend's wife. She bought me a real orchid when I got refugee status and moved into my new place. I was working a lot, and sometimes I forgot to water it and eventually it died. I felt so bad about it. I didn't want her to know, because I didn't want her to feel like I didn't care about her gift – it was very precious to me. So I bought a fake one and put it exactly where the real one used to be.*

Close friendships provided a valuable space of relief and comfort amidst the worry of their everyday struggles. With close friends, they would learn, have fun, laugh, explore, talk about their musings and their aspirations for life—anything other than their problems. As Doyo said about his friend, a fellow Congolese:

> *We just talk about many things…relationships like, ladies [embarrassed smile], we go a little bit far away with our conversation. We talk about life, how we are doing life, as we are new to this country, there are many, many things that we share.*

These relations and mundane care exchanges were equally valuable parts of caring friendships. To receive a camera or a plant, or to talk about everyday matters made them feel connected, noticed, 'normal', more human within a system that works to dehumanize.

The ability and willingness to reciprocate care

The destabilising character of the asylum system does not only affect which friendships the participants are able and willing to make. It also shapes how they feel able to care for friends and the degree to which they can reciprocate care. Importantly, the participants' stories illustrate how care practices change across time and the circumstances of the people involved. Notably, the participants emphasised the positive role of NGOs in supporting them to make choices about how, where, and when to engage in care and in the social relations that they formed while seeking asylum.

Distancing oneself from 'fake friends'

Some degree of structural security was pivotal in enabling the participants to forge friendships in ways that suit their circumstances. It enabled them to mediate their distrust of others and avoid and withdraw from friendships if these were exploitative or simply not comfortable. Refugee NGOs, like BH, were presented as important safe spaces where they participants could meet people they could trust and where they could find support. The participants spoke with pride about their renewed confidence to make good decisions about how to relate to others. For instance, Eni, who had been granted refugee status, described a feeling of "peace of mind" in being able to be cautious in friendship. She was not able to do this when she was living a much more precarious life while seeking asylum:

> *Now no [laughs], I choose what I want to be like. Before, you know, you don't have a choice, but now, you know, [shakes head] 'mhm-mhm' […] before [when I just came here] I didn't know anything, I didn't know what to do, yeah. But now no. I think I have my choice now to stay alone. (Eni)*

When Eni was eventually referred to BH, her "full confidence [in managing relations] came back" as her caseworker there told her "'No you don't have to do those things', that actually helped me. Really did". Importantly, BH staff told her that she had options, that "nobody should cross you, nobody should do this, do that". This made her feel "really relieved" and she started "stepping back" from people more. No longer constantly relocated to accommodations in other cities, unable to work, and uncertain about her future in the UK, Eni, as the other participants who secured refugee status, found that her new circumstances gave her a more solid base from where she could choose who to engage with and to what degree. While there is always a risk of engaging in exploitative relations, she could afford to exercise caution.

Care-giving and receiving among 'friendly acquaintances'

While the participants were waiting for their asylum claim, their lives were characterised by precarity which had a clear negative effect on their wellbeing. During this period, they made meaningful 'friendly acquaintances', described earlier. Their ability to engage with and care for these acquaintances was heavily shaped by the institutional environment of the asylum system, which entails sudden relocations, lack of financial means and lack of trust.

Similar to the networks of solidarity or 'communities of convenience' that often form between migrants during hardship (Landau, 2018), the ASRs shared material and practical support between friendly acquaintances, helping each other cope with the challenges and confusion of the asylum system. For instance, Doyo helped translate and explain Home Office and housing letters to people he met at his local refugee drop-in. Eni regularly cooked for people at her old asylum accommodation and at church, and they provided her with clothes, make-up and house essentials. Ricky, while in transit in Italy, bought clippers, illustrated in Fig. 2, to cut other migrants' hair. He said:

> *I managed to save money and I got my own clippers because cutting hair is very expensive. Every weekend people would come to borrow my clippers, so they could shave. Because if you go to the barber to cut your hair, it's going to cost you 10 euros, but there was a person in the camp who knew how to cut hair, so I just gave him the clippers and he cut people's hair. So they didn't have to pay […] It was good for me because I could put a smile on people's face, because when your hair is getting long and it's not looking that nice, and then you cut your hair, it means*

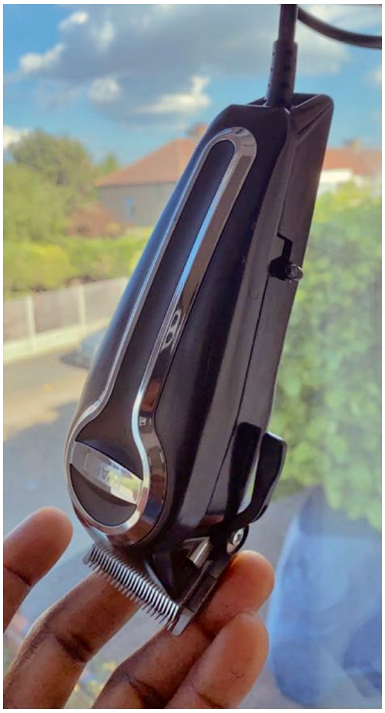

Fig. 2 Ricky's photo

> *a lot to people. And I also saved them 10 euros, so it felt good.*

These apparently simple exchanges meant much more than their use value. Giving and receiving material support between 'friendly acquaintances' felt good and gave the participants a sense of contentment and reciprocity about the people around them despite knowing little about each other.

Spending time with 'respectful friends' within NGO groups, also had a significant impact. Several participants described deciding to make friends only in NGO spaces, because they felt better able to trust people there, as Ricky explained "[BH] knows about them, you have already like checked them out, so I trust they are good people". Abdul, a young Afghani asylum seeker, described people at the football club he sometimes played at as "very good people" who "talk nicely and they try to distract your mind" from his loneliness and insecurity. Similarly, the photography workshops where we conducted the research were seen as spaces where friendly acquaintances could develop and care flow. When asked to think of a time he felt cared for by a friend, Doyo talked fondly about Kasun sharing photography tips with him. Kasun did not consider Doyo a close friend, or his tip-sharing particularly caring, but to Doyo, it was meaningful and gave him confidence in his own capabilities. "He cares about me—maybe I could be a photographer like him", he said. Safe spaces such as the football club or the photography workshop offered a sense of warmth and welcome where participants could engage in activities that would not centre around their asylum journey. The relationships there were critical for their wellbeing as they could generate feelings of self-worth and self-belief.

Obstacles to care for 'friendly acquaintances'

Much of the superficiality that characterised relations with 'friendly acquaintances' was dictated by the precarity of their lives as ASRs. As they are constantly subject to potential and sudden relocation, the participants who were in Home Office accommodations underlined that it was hard for them to invest in and develop social relations. Ricky explained this well:

> *I mean mostly I am just in my room. […] I don't want to go deep or get involved with them, just 'hi' that's it. In my previous place I tried to make friends and all that, but like we are living in this accommodation but what about tomorrow? You don't know.*

Similarly, Doyo tried to establish friendly relations at a football club near the accommodation he lived at, and he played there weekly for a month and a half. When he was relocated with three days' notice to a different accommodation 10 km away, he struggled to join the club regularly:

> *[The football club] was in [postcode], a little bit far. I have to travel, and they are playing late, until 10pm, so it's a bit hard to come back […] now my mind is like, should I give up because it's a long way to go, things like that.*

The months-, if not years-, long mechanisms of reporting, dispersal, relocation and detention that characterises the British asylum system affects the participants' ability to establish friendly acquaintances, which requires some level of sustained contact. Doyo and Ricky felt that they had to begin from scratch after each move, looking for new places where they could befriend people, always aware of the possible risks of opening up to strangers. The temporary character of the relations they forge might, in some cases, worsen ASRs' sense of isolation in the UK with detrimental impact on their wellbeing and self-esteem, as suggested by Abdul who reported feeling "lonely and isolated" after multiple moves.

With friendly acquaintances, limited trust and openness did not necessarily get in the way of caring or feeling cared for. Indeed, the emotional distance between friendly acquaintances opened new opportunities for care that were not possible between close friends who knew them well. Relieved from the pressure to talk about or be defined by their problems, they could enjoy momentary respite from their everyday struggles, as Doyo explained, "it's another experience, we can just speak, be connected with the normal life, the social life". This suggests that ASRs do not necessarily have to choose between withdrawing from friendship networks or fully open up and trust friends. To understand friendship as a voluntary relation that runs across a spectrum (Amrith, 2018) throws into relief how caution and sometimes even suspicion in friendships, often easily dismissed as signs of vulnerability, can be understood as capability. When they had lived 'under the radar' or lost housing after becoming ARE, they could not afford to be cautious, but paying attention to how ASRs make sense of it shows how caution is both an agentic and self-caring decision; it enables them to make a choice about when and with whom to enter friendships.

Reciprocating care in close friendship

Relationships with close friends were important to the participants' emotional and material wellbeing. However, their ability to care for their close friends in ways they felt happy about was deeply affected by the asylum system. The participants identified deportability, lack of financial means, and poor mental health as key obstacles to caregiving, but they nonetheless found way to navigate these challenges and engage care-fully.

The asylum system's governance strategies of surveillance and relocation disrupted the participants' ability to care for their close friends. Ricky recounted when his best friend lost his job and was encountered as having overstayed his visa by immigration officials in a stop-and-search. He was detained for one month and was subsequently deported to Nigeria. Ricky had been at pains to know how he could care for his friend, who had shown considerable support to him in the preceding years. Being relocated far away from the church they attended together made it too expensive to meet up, and without legal status, he felt unable to visit him in detention:

> *People from the church went to see him, to see if he's ok. I couldn't go because of my status. With my situation. So, I am not allowed to go to the detention, because it was outside London anyway. […] I was trying to support him over the phone and I was very positive that they are going to release him, but the afterwards I just heard that he has been taken to Nigeria, so I was very shocked.*

Now permanently separated and without means of contacting his friend, Ricky said, "I just keep him in my prayers, and pray things are going well for him". Ricky's words help nuance care practices. According to several participants, one does not necessarily have to *do* something to show care. Having a friend in one's thoughts and wanting them to be well is also a way to care.

Mutual emotional and practical support between close friends gave the participants the strength to overcome some of the challenges of the asylum system, while also showing commitment and even risk-taking to support their friends and take on the role as care givers. For example, Freedom took her best friend into her home shortly after meeting each other, because she was going through difficulties and was heavily pregnant. One day when Freedom was out, her flat was raided by immigration enforcement and her friend was detained. Despite being liable for detention herself as ARE, Freedom visited her friend in detention to bring toiletries and clothes, offer emotional support, and liaised with her friend's lawyer to secure her release. A few months later Freedom was detained, and her friend supported her:

> *She did exactly the same for me. She had to go through my papers, she did a lot for me…she even took my papers to court when the lawyer couldn't do it – and this is somebody who didn't have any documents as well.*

Freedom's experiences illustrate the fluidity of caring relationships between friends, where the caregiver/receiver dynamic can shift, often multiple times and through times of crises. It was in these periods of hardship that the participants said they came to know who their real friends were, where they could show their commitment for one another and strengthen their emotional bond.

Being in the asylum system put the participants in a position of financial deprivation that meant they could not reciprocate care in a way they found satisfactory. Hence mutuality in care relationships was undermined. For example, they would often have to turn down invites to go on holiday, a day trip out of the city, or simply to the cinema because they could not afford it, even though it might be something that would make them feel better. The financial difficulties imposed on them by their status as asylum seekers or ARE excluded the participants from the fun, light-hearted parts of friendship that were so important to them. Ricky recalled when his friend invited him out to a nightclub:

> *They said, let's go to the nightclub and I couldn't enter. Why? Because I don't have an ID, I haven't got ID... So I couldn't get into the nightclub. Also they saw the clothes I was wearing, and they wouldn't let me enter the club with those clothes. That was really embarrassing for me. It actually made me feel really down, I feel very…kind of depressed you know, like as a human you can't even associate with other people because you don't have these certain things.*

This experience exposed Ricky's asylum-seeking status and illustrates how the poverty and insecurity of the hostile asylum system limits ASRs' ability to care and socialise, disempowering and dehumanizing them. Financial difficulties also prevented the participants from showing appreciation for friends in the ways they wanted to. Thus, while gift-giving was raised by several participants as an important "symbol of friendship" (Doyo), they often felt unable to afford appropriate gifts. Eni turned down her friends' invitations to celebrations because she could not afford to buy a gift, and she felt too embarrassed to go without one:

> *I'm always ashamed, thinking how can I go there, you know? Like, going to a barbeque and I can't bring something to eat or drink…Like, I am supposed to go to a friend's birthday, but I can't go because it's a party this one, and I don't have money to buy a gift! So that's why I'm not going…to me it's too much, it doesn't feel good to always be the one who is not giving them anything.*

The participants clearly expressed that their shame was not because of pressure from friends to return favours, but their own desire to feel good and be useful. They tried to navigate the limits to their caregiving imposed by the hostile environment by opting to care for their friends through small gestures like buying a drink for a friend and sweets for their friends' children, or offering time and energy to cook meals, clean, assist with childcare for friends and even help at their friends' workplace. Engaging in such tasks for others without payment can often slip into exploitative practices amongst migrants in precarity. Yet, the ASRs in this study expressly refuted notions that this kind of caring might be unfair or unequal.[3] This was not work, they argued. In fact, though being unemployed hindered their ability to care in many ways, they emphasized that being out of work enabled them to offer this type of support and, significantly, they enjoyed it. For instance, Kasun when his claim was pending and he could not work, often helped at his friend's shop when it was busy:

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[3] It is important to consider that the ASRs' narratives might reflect an attempt to allay any (anticipated) suggestion that these types of support could be exploitative. As service-users of a counter-trafficking NGO, it is likely they have been asked similar questions in safeguarding assessments, or to avoid any accusations of working whilst being prohibited from doing so.

> *Kasun: I never took money [smiles], it's not like I'm working. I'm helping him…and it was just our time you know, friends time.*
> *Maria Wardale: It sounds like you were a great help to him.*
> *Kasun: [laughs] It's not like that! We were just having a good time you know. Like we do things, we talk, we're working but then we're joking, two positive things going at once, and we're just happy, even though we were tired, you feel good when the job is done.*

Kasun made clear that offering help was as much about his own enjoyment and self-worth as about caring for his friend. This is not to underrate the risks of highly unequal and exploitative situations common amongst ASRs. Instead, this example highlights how the subjective experiences of care are shaped through the type of social relationships that sustain them. Without taking into account ASRs' own sense-making, these small gestures and helpful acts might appear insignificant, or invoke pity or outrage at the poverty experienced by ASRs.

All participants described experiencing long-term and ongoing difficulties with their mental health which appeared to closely reflect 'post-migration stressors' (Carswell et al., 2011)—the protracted insecurity, scarcity and risk of deportation of the asylum system, or the multiple challenges associated with life after refugee status. Poor mental health impacted how ASRs were able to engage with close friends. For instance, Freedom's highly precarious ARE status had taken a considerable emotional toll, "there are days that I'm down, days that I have migraine, I'm stressed, I'm stressed, I'm depressed I'm depressed, I start thinking about things, I start thinking about my past…", she said. During times like these, responding to her friends' support needs and her own was difficult if not impossible. Participants were acutely aware of how their mental health impacted their ability to give care and were determined to reciprocate once they were able to. Freedom, talking about her best friend who has taken her into her two-bedroom flat she shared with her three children, said: "one day I want to be able to give back, in the same way that I feel like I should give back to the community at some point, it's the same way I feel for her". Freedom's words highlight how the limited resources available to her, together with poor mental health arising from trauma and stress meant that she felt she was under-reciprocating the care she received from close friends. It shows how care is not always a 'cosy' interdependence (Raghuram et al., 2009), and that mutuality in friendship does not simply 'flow'. Instead, care and friendship, while very important sources of emotional and material support, could also be sources of distress that ASRs managed through informal reciprocity and selective disclosure. Sometimes this meant withholding some information, particularly regarding their mental health, in case it worried their friends. Even with her closest friend who she felt a strong connection with, Ruwanthi explained why she tried to hide her emotional outbursts and memory impairment (relating to her traumatic experiences), "I worry that if I told her, she won't like me anymore and I don't want that to happen. I'm trying to protect my friendship because I can't find anyone else", she said. Of course, Ruwanthi's decision to hide part of her struggles from her friend should not be romanticized, but her justification highlights how it helps Ruwanthi feel a semblance of control in her otherwise highly vulnerable situation whilst also being an attempt to protect each other's feelings, and ultimately preserve the friendship.

Conclusions

Responding to calls to situate friendship and care within the broader socio-political landscape, and the power inequalities therein (Bowlby, 2011; Raghuram et al., 2009; Narayan, 1995), this article examined how the asylum system in the UK shape ASR's ability to make, sustain and strengthen care relations. In a hostile environment where formal care is sparse, unpredictable, and frequently withdrawn at short notice; where social connections are repeatedly disrupted; where migrants are criminalized and stigmatized; and where they live in a context of protracted precarity, the conditions required for trust—an underpinning foundation of care and friendship—become fragile. For those like the ASRs in this study, whose experiences of betrayal and deceit weaken levels of trust even before arrival, these overlapping mechanisms make it even more difficult to sustain meaningful connections with others.

Yet, the findings of the study suggest that, in the time the participants are 'stuck' in a situation of precarity and uncertainty while their asylum case is processed, possibly appealed and submitted again, they also (and naturally) engage in a diversity of caring relationships which, although shaped by structural insecurity and poor mental health, are not defined by them. Indeed, the article has sought to argue that a focus on practices of care-giving among population considered to be mainly care-receiving, redirects our attention to their agency in engaging with others, forging relations, and reciprocate care whilst in a context of precarity and structural (and in some instances psychological) vulnerability. Almost all the ASRs in this study had people they called friends, with varying degrees of intimacy and trust—from 'friendly acquaintances' to good friends. The financial constraints and emotional toll of seeking asylum could make attempts to maintain reciprocity within friendships feel like a burden. These relationships did not necessarily feel caring, but were rather possible triggers of guilt and shame, illustrating the ambivalence of care in contexts of inequality. Notwithstanding these challenges, these friendships rarely fell into the patterns of dependence, coercion or exploitation that some have warned against (e.g. Waite & Lewis, 2017), suggesting that these experiences might be possible, but not inevitable, even in contexts of considerable precarity. Importantly, for many of the ASRs in this study, caring in friendships took on a new, more meaningful value during particularly difficult periods. The ASRs described how the emotional and practical support of friends had felt life-saving, and it was during these times that their friendships were galvanized. At the same time however, other more banal, fleeting and light-hearted forms of care—small gifts, pleasant greetings, translating a letter between friends even where levels of openness and trust were limited, could prove deeply valuable ways to restore self-worth and hope. These more superficial relations do not imply strong ties, but this does not detract from their significance as a form of social support or pleasurable sociality that can function as an escape route from the stress entailed in the process of seeking asylum. In these varied ways, care- giving and -receiving in friendships helped them cope with and find relief from the insecurity, strain and hardship of seeking asylum. As such, it is important not to make assumptions about the nature of care within contexts of insecurity, but to better understand the texture, and diversity of the relationships and exchanges through which care and friendship are experienced.

Acknowledging how care in friendships can arise or be sustained through hardship is not to suggest that friendship is intrinsically caring or resilient, as earlier idealised conceptualisations of friendship might suggest. Rather, as the ASRs' experiences made clear, care is made possible through an active ongoing negotiation, in the 'doing' of friendship. This 'doing' of friendship amongst ASRs has largely been overlooked, and suspicion, dishonesty, and 'invisibility' have been understood as indicators of vulnerability and an absence of care. However, as this study has shown, this is not necessarily how ASRs understand these practices themselves. To dismiss these approaches to friendship not only overlooks their subtlety. Many of the friendships described here are characterised by caution, not avoidance, and selectivity, not dishonesty. Critically, it also fails to acknowledge the conscious, thoughtful, care-full decision-making that underpins them. The article has made evident how the context of seeking asylum and the time spent in the system disrupt friendship making and care exchanges. Sometimes participants had to choose between prioritising their material or emotional needs, to the detriment of their desire to care for and engage with friends. This made them feel ashamed or guilty. Most participants found ways to navigate these challenges, but these were not straightforward. Highlighting this ambiguity is important to show that care requires constant negotiations with others and with oneself.

The study also suggests that NGOs, such as BH, are important actors in providing ASRs with the tools to navigate friendship relations: how to protect themselves from 'fake friends'; how to exercise cautions and partial disclosure with 'friendly acquaintances'; and how to prioritise their wellbeing and navigate the limitations imposed by the asylum system. The tole of NGOs cannot be romanticised, however. First, the participants might not have felt able to be honest about negative experiences in BH or other NGOs. Second, the participants were living in a context of hostility that daily damaged their sense of self-worth and, thus, their perceived ability to care. The UK's hostile environment presented risks that made opening up to others difficult. Those waiting for their application to be processed felt starkly the stress of deportability induced by the hostile environment. They had internalised a sense of shame about their legal status that made them wary of their interactions with others. That this stigma they feared (or faced) reflected notions of criminality and (un)deservingness propagated by political and media discourse is significant, because it highlights the very real impact that discursive structures can have on the ways ASRs feel able to enter and build trust in friendships.

If we are to develop an empirically engaged and nuanced understanding of care in friendships, we need to look at the silences, the caution, the 'stepping back' from as much as the engagement in friendships. For those like the ASRs in this study who have not always had the option to be cautious, but who remain in situations of insecurity and scarcity, choosing when and how to engage in friendships, on their own terms, might be the most significant expression of care and autonomy. By identifying the ways that ASRs play an active role in shaping their own caring networks, this study offers an important counter-narrative to the dominant portrayal of ASRs as passive recipients of care. However, recognising autonomy and decision-making should not be romanticized. Their means of navigating friendships were fragile, born out of contexts of protracted hostility and histories of betrayal and all recognised that their ability to care more, for friends and for themselves, would only come with the peace of mind of a secure and financially stable future in the UK.

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Author contributions

MW collected the data for this study and conducted the first analysis. SS further developed the analysis and wrote the final version of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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