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Population Healing: Languages, Creativity and the Extraordinary Normality of Migration

Summary

In this talk Professor Alison Phipps describes migration as an ‘extraordinarily normal’ phenomenon. Alongside migration comes an industry dedicated to population health and its analysis. These statistics though are only one way of characterising and representing migration, there are other nuances and shades that we need to be attentive to. One such characterisation is the split between migrants as human capital and human lives as represented in the debates around economic migrants. In her work Prof Phipps is attempting to open out the ethical nuances in how we use and represent data. She describes her work involving artists who are given power to represent and interrupt the research narrative. She goes on to talk about the place of languages as the primary facilitators of integration and healing. She uses a number of case studies to illustrate how this is being expressed in particular contexts.

The current context surrounding migration is rather overwhelming. Prof Phipps started by explaining that she finds herself in the middle of a media storm with things going at a rather different pace from the usual one that academic work tends to flow to. But for this lecture she chose to start off in a slightly different mood with a poem: *‘In the name of’*, honouring women and migrants across the world, followed by a video designed to show how normal it is to live in a multitude of languages.

Migration is normal. This was Prof Phipps first point and she argued one of the only facts we can trust in the debate about migration and refugees at the moment. It is normal to flee when in danger as a human being. It is normal to move around.

The second point is that what happens as a result of that movement can be called **‘extraordinarily normal’**. Periods of movement are a normal part of people’s lives and trajectories over a life span. However, the kinds of encounters and the things that happen when you have to make sense and meaning of a world that hasn’t been created before out of these particular languages and cultures, these people in this place, in this history and time is something extraordinary. Some places at some points in history are more marked by migration than others but overall it is a normal phenomenon.

At the moment the current situation is characterised as a ‘refugee crisis’ but it is actually a political crisis and has been going on in its present form for about 15 years at least. By using the language of ‘crisis’ we are mobilising a discourse of emergency that is out of step with people’s normal general movements to ensure a degree of stability for themselves and their families.

Alongside this comes an industry dedicated to population health and its analysis. Particularly **a statistical industry** that has **a particular way of representing** and understanding the forms and formats that migration flows might take. We see these kinds of numbers a lot at the moment in the press and they tend to characterise the debate around migration. Historically Scotland has been a country of net out migration but in the last 20 years from 1990 onwards has mostly experienced net inward migration gains. Between 2003/4 and 2010/11 there were net gains of at least 18,600 a year. These are not big figures but they do represent a change. Again this shows the normality of migration how it flows in different directions under different historical and political conditions at different times.

To put this in context, refugee migration (which is a small amount of overall migration and population movements) is estimated at 61 million refugees. Two thirds of these are living in developing countries. In 2012 Scotland hosted around 2000 asylum seekers. This is a tiny proportion of the world's refugee population and around 10% of the total number of asylum seekers making claims in the UK. If all the refugees and asylum seekers living in Scotland were gathered at Hampden Stadium it would be less than 40% full.

Contrast this with some other figures for normal seasonal and long term migration. In 2015 there were 15.5 million overnight tourism bed nights in Scotland. In higher education in the UK there are 11,400 students from the EU and 106,915 international students from outside the EU. 11% of the UK population move house every year. So these are interesting figures in the context of the discussions of how we can welcome 2000 Syrians refugees in Scotland. We clearly already have some welcoming infrastructure in place.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has an interactive map which is a useful and fun tool. However, we need to use any figures on migration with a healthy degree of scepticism as we cannot currently say this is reliable data. Lots of new methods are being used and there is often multiple counting as people move backwards and forwards over international borders. A lot of this information is also being used for ideological purposes as opposed to purposes that might help us really think about what population planning might look like.

Thinking through some of the other ways migration, as an extraordinarily ordinary activity, is being represented a quote from Gayatri Spivak has proven to be thought provoking: *"Globalisation takes place only in capital and data, all else is damage control"*. Current debates are characterised by a split between an understanding of **human beings as capital** and an understanding of **human beings as lives**.

The economic migrant at the moment seems to be the real bugbear of policy makers. These are the ones we don't want unless they come with lots of human capital, in which case we do. But Prof Phipps stressed that there is no such thing as a migrant who is not also an economic migrant. It is not possible to move without some form of exchange, gift giving, and economic transfer taking place. All migrants are economic migrants. She argued that this appellation is there really to try and

make false distinctions. So human capital, human lives: around the capital the movement is meant to be unproblematic and damage free but it is when we look at the context of human lives that we see the damage starting to accrue right across the board.

Many of our ways of approaching the issues to do with migration fit in with what Lederach and Lederach have called **project driven mentalities** and logistical sequencing of events for addressing change which miss out on the metaphors of lived experience in the world. When we are trying to count and quantify it all and use the symbolic system of numbering and representations in graphs and pie charts we are only getting one story. It is an important story and has its place. Science can answer some really important questions but it can't answer them all. Prof Phipps suggested that there are nuances and shades that we need to be attentive to particularly at the moment when the debate is as heatedly characterised as it is. Migration is normal, migration is also beautiful.



There are also a number of questions that are being asked around migration as human capital that link with discourses around population happiness, wellbeing and health and move us on from fears around population change. Questions such as: can migration assist us with our happiness indices? What does diversity do for us? How can we map the human capital contributions of migrants?

The question Prof Phipps is asking of herself and of population health is To do what and at whose expense? In her work she is trying to **open out the ethical nuances there are in how we use our data, how we represent our data**, what the pictures form and stories are that we

use and what the contributions can be from arts and creativity and also from other languages to interrupting the narrative of flow, statistic, pie chart and number. To look at the ways in which economic migration and human protection are being set at odds with one another.

Alison's team is beginning to not just ask these questions but to also look at how we do this for example to offer up the tools of representation to others not just to themselves as academics. Even when working in collaborative, participatory ways it is still normal as an academic to bring all the data home and sit in the office and do the analysis yourself and publish it in journals: to hold on to the power of representation. If we are really serious about an ethics of migration and co-production then at some point we have to have a go at doing something a bit different.

Animist (by Tawona Sithole)

there he goes, the animist
half present, half historic
part man, part mystery
most say they've heard of him
of his ancestry, one of savagery
from the dark old continent
primitive being, of the dim lands
before they were industrialised
wild remnant of the tribes
before they were civilised
rough relic of the East
before it was brutalised

wonder how he escaped
when most were standardised
declined to be normalised
looks like this is one
one of them
who somehow got through
primitive and untamed

here he comes, the animist
half real, half surreal
part man, part earth
trusts in the spirits
of the land, air and water
been that way since birth
guess he's creation's romantic
worships the ground he walks on
he prays to the trees, apparently
they keep him medicated
and worships mountains, allegedly
they keep him dedicated
walks past the hills and nods
maybe checking in with the gods
that keeps him meditated

wonder how he escaped
when most were standardised
declined to be normalised
looks like this is one
one of them
who somehow got through
primitive and untamed

there he goes, the animist
half man, half creature
part man, part myth
not known to be egotistic or materialistic
in fact, they say he is a minimalist
*is he an animist, because he is animalistic?
only god knows! but it's said
he keeps company of the beasts
flocks with zebra; plays with monkeys
he roams and sleeps, with the lions
forages with elephants; nestles with the birds
and when the earth tilts, they say
he swims with the fish in the night-light
and then it's the mermaids*

wonder how he escaped
when most were standardised
declined to be normalised
looks like this is one
one of them
who somehow got through

there he goes, the animist
half man, half amazing
part legend, part truth
figment of the unknown, a question mark
in the grammar of convention
the ill-fitting piece of a jigsaw
a wonder unto the scientist
anthropologist, and the methodist
a herbalist, an environmentalist
a fable sewed onto reality
by sheer threads of superstition
man of the past, mystic of today
nevertheless, a man

wonder how he escaped
when most were standardised
declined to be normalised
looks like this is one
one of them
who somehow got through
primitive and untamed

This poem was delivered by Tawona Sithole, who with his partner Tarneem Al Mousawi who did the illustrations for this poem, has been working with Prof Phipps and her team on a large scale project looking at multilingualism, languages, creativity, borders, body, law and states. As part of the project, the researchers have allowed artists to represent what they see the academics working on and to offer this as an interpretation, an intervention a challenge or a provocation. This also helps the academics, who are used to having a narrative flow such as in this lecture, deal with interruption and with other people having the power and the art of representation and rhetoric.

Central to the current work is **the place of languages as the primary facilitators of social integration and healing** of populations both for the host population and others. This builds on the work of Alastair Ager and Alison Strang on markers of integration. Prof Phipps and her team are asking the question: what difference does it make that we are working in English researching people for whom this is not their mother tongue? How is it that in our representation of research we pretend that this hasn't happened? These questions are normal for linguists but they are working in this project with people with medical and legal backgrounds alongside people who teach English as a second language. They are working across a range of different disciplines and looking at what happens to language when it is under pain or pressure. They are challenging the cult of English/monolingually masked research.

There are debates at the moment about **ESOL provision**. People are being funded for 60 hours to learn English as a second language but it is not possible to do it in this time. We need to learn from the best models we have of how we enable people to use languages as facilitators of wellbeing and belonging. We are addressing this issue using a deficit model rather than embracing the reality of people who are coming from contexts where multilingualism is normal and language learning is built in and embedded into forms and structures of conversations. We need to stop using languages as a proxy for diversity and get on with the practical work of offering languages. Anthony Pimm has mapped the cost of translation against the cost of providing sufficient language learning opportunities to newly arrived people and after 2 years the lines cross over. The costs of translation go down and the language learners become confident users of another language able to function and make friends. This is not just about a service delivery model it is about community empowerment. How do we become language friends and companions – people who are not stingy with our language? How do we also learn from the languages coming with the migrants as these are always the languages we need in our futures?

In the final part of the talk Prof Phipps shared a couple of **examples from her work** looking at particular contexts of such as diversity starvation in a population. How these populations have survived, how their languages have survived and what this has been doing for their own sense of health and healing within their populations.

The first is a case study at the **Islamic University of Gaza**. Here they designed a different way of learning languages that embedded the real experiences that people have in this very difficult context and where conflict and compassion were central themes. The university declared itself a multilingual campus functioning in six languages including Arabic (under threat from NGO and project management English), Braille, Arabic Sign language, Modern Hebrew and Art. Art would be understood as a language as a metaphor for enabling people to express things that they might not be able to express in different forms. They also worked to address the needs of the lack of diversity in a population under siege who are unable to travel out of the country, by using video conferencing. They also discovered that many of the students doing the sign language diploma had experienced the war but hadn't heard it and much of the discourse around the war was about hearing for example, the bombing. So using the arts they did a project enabling them to express these experiences using visual media. So you can tell the story of Gaza in numbers killed but you can also tell it a different way about how a population cut off from the healing resources of diversity are beginning to overcome some of that for themselves.

A second example is a project linked to the **Red Road Flats in Glasgow** a place of great ambivalence where lots of different things have happened but most recently has housed many migrants. From listening to the local population about the imminent demolition of the flats they heard about a need for a space to grieve, a space to express themselves and a place to express themselves in multiple languages. This led to a project called Future Memory to sing goodbye to the Red Road flats. Using art and language they worked with the local population in a variety of ways. They were using a different mode. A mode that is full of metaphor and symbol. It offers a way of bringing arts and languages together to speak in to the space of the normality and the extraordinariness of migration. Art that is only possible because of what we have done with these flats, at this moment in time, in this city with these people, making story together by coming together.

Finally Prof Phipps spoke about her work in **Aotearoa in New Zealand** with the Tuhoë Maori. The Tuhoë Maori are probably the most persecuted group that there has been of indigenous people in New Zealand. New Zealand has now declared itself a bilingual country and has put this in to policy as a way of trying to atone for, repair and work with the legacies that come with any history in any place in the world. As part of her work Alison decided to learn some of the language in the way that the Maori have used to keep their language alive. You first have to understand where the language comes from and the place of your body in the production of any word. You then have to learn using a technique which involves watching how people speak, listening to how people speak and then through bodily action. Learning a language like this for someone coming out of a highly literate context was challenging. But thriving multilingual populations such as in Ghana work with these methods all the time. They embed them in to everyday speech. It is normal to say 'in my language we would say', 'in my culture we would do' as part of introducing and enabling relationships. This means that mutual understanding is embedded into the

health of the population at every level. As part of learning Maori, after 6 weeks you have to give your 'Mihi' as a way of opening yourself out and describing your context to others. This is actually a profound way of doing identity and healing work and of enabling engagement with others. It is a way of revealing to others where they might need to be careful and why because they know something about where you are from, where you have lived, which part of the earth you have inhabited. So Alison finished by offering us her personal 'Mihi' as a way of giving us a sense of herself in some of the vulnerability and possibility that a 'Mihi' allows.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.
Summary prepared by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.