



The Global Society on  
Migration, Ethnicity, Race and Health  
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Kingston  
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# How nature and culture provide a sanctuary for escaping the struggles of being a migrant and supporting the mental health and wellbeing of Black, ethnic minority, and refugee communities in England: A qualitative study

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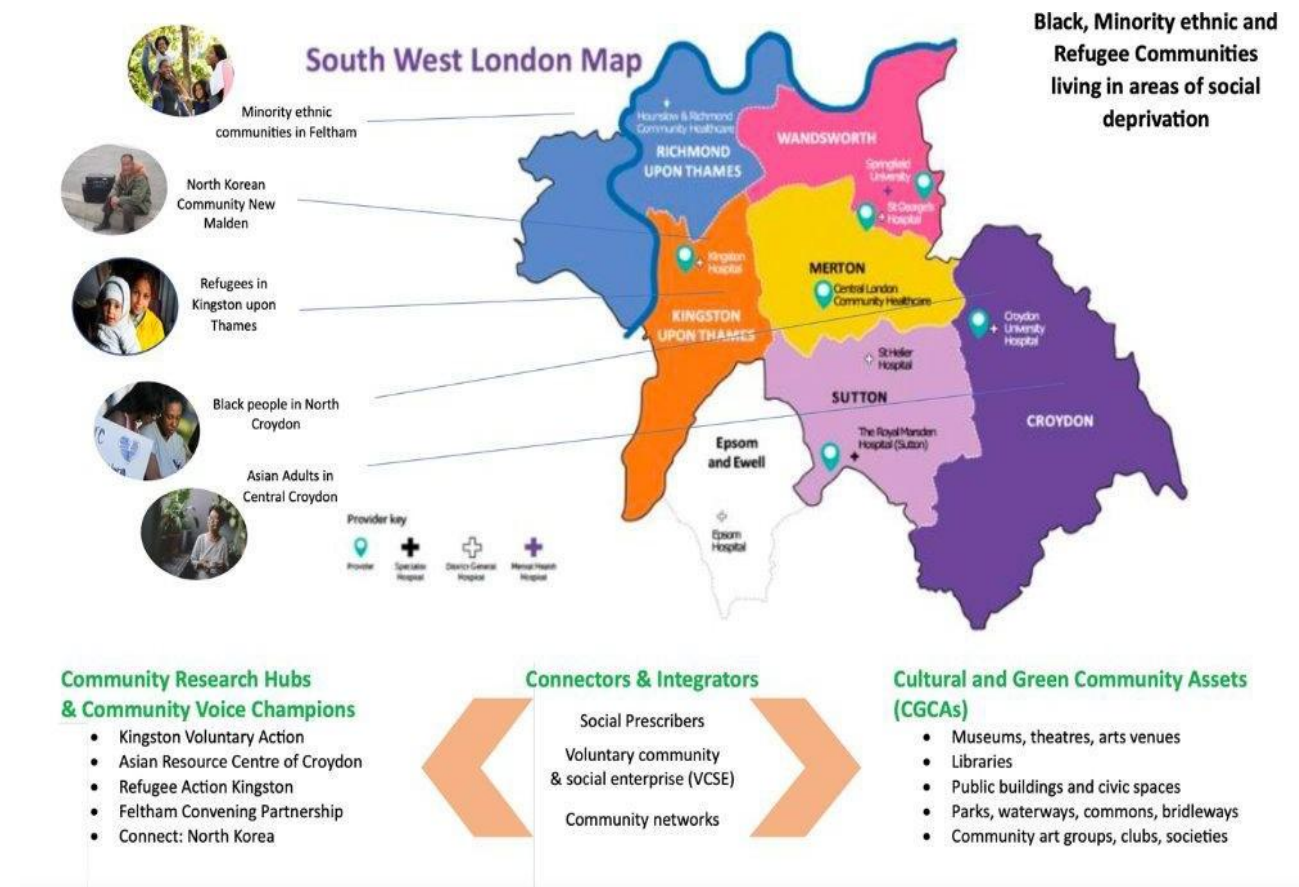


REFUGEE  
ACTION  
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# Background

- Black, ethnic minority and refugee communities live in unhealthy urban environments (Lloyd et al, 2024, Marmot et al., 2020)
- Greatest risk of poor mental health and wellbeing
- Least likely to engage with cultural and green community assets that support mental health (Collins et al., 2020)
- Positive impacts interlinked with psychosocial, social and behavioural factors (Farcourt & Finn, 2019)



# Background

- Cultural and green community assets need to be negotiated
- Identify and understand barriers as well as enablers to access and engagement (Mark et al., 2024)
- Limited evidence on experiences of marginalised and underserved communities (Jimenez et al., 2021)
- Little research at community level, together with communities, to understand their experiences and needs



# Aims

- To generate lived experience stories of the relationship and engagement of underserved communities with green and cultural assets, and how such assets intersect or not with their mental health, migrant status, values, and interests
- Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded 'Abundance Project'
- Developing and evaluating community-led ways to encourage engagement with cultural and green assets
- 'Abundance mindset': recognising skills, abilities and resources in marginalised and underserved communities
- Solutions catalysing local action on mental health and wellbeing

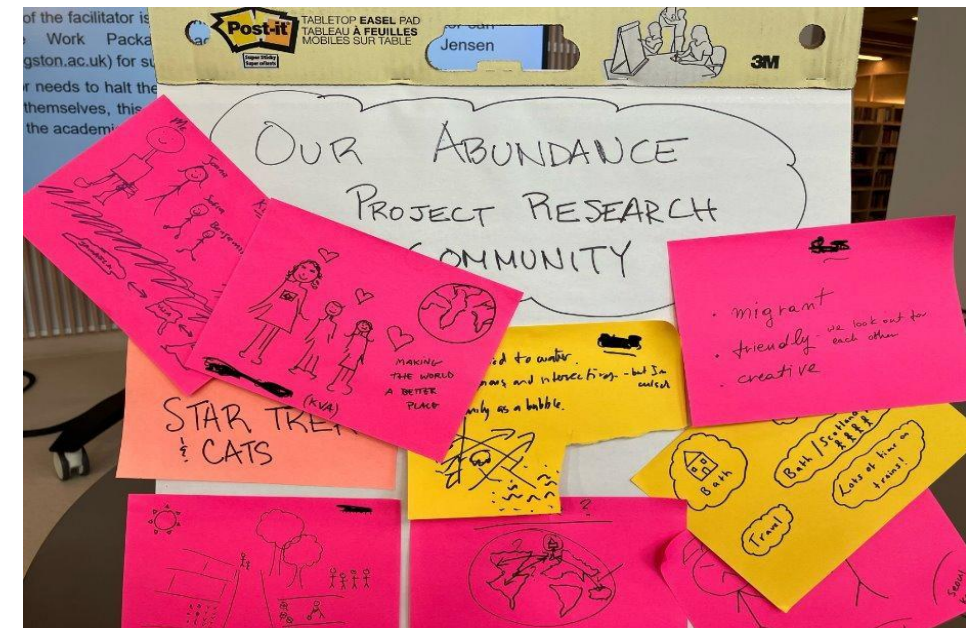


# Methods

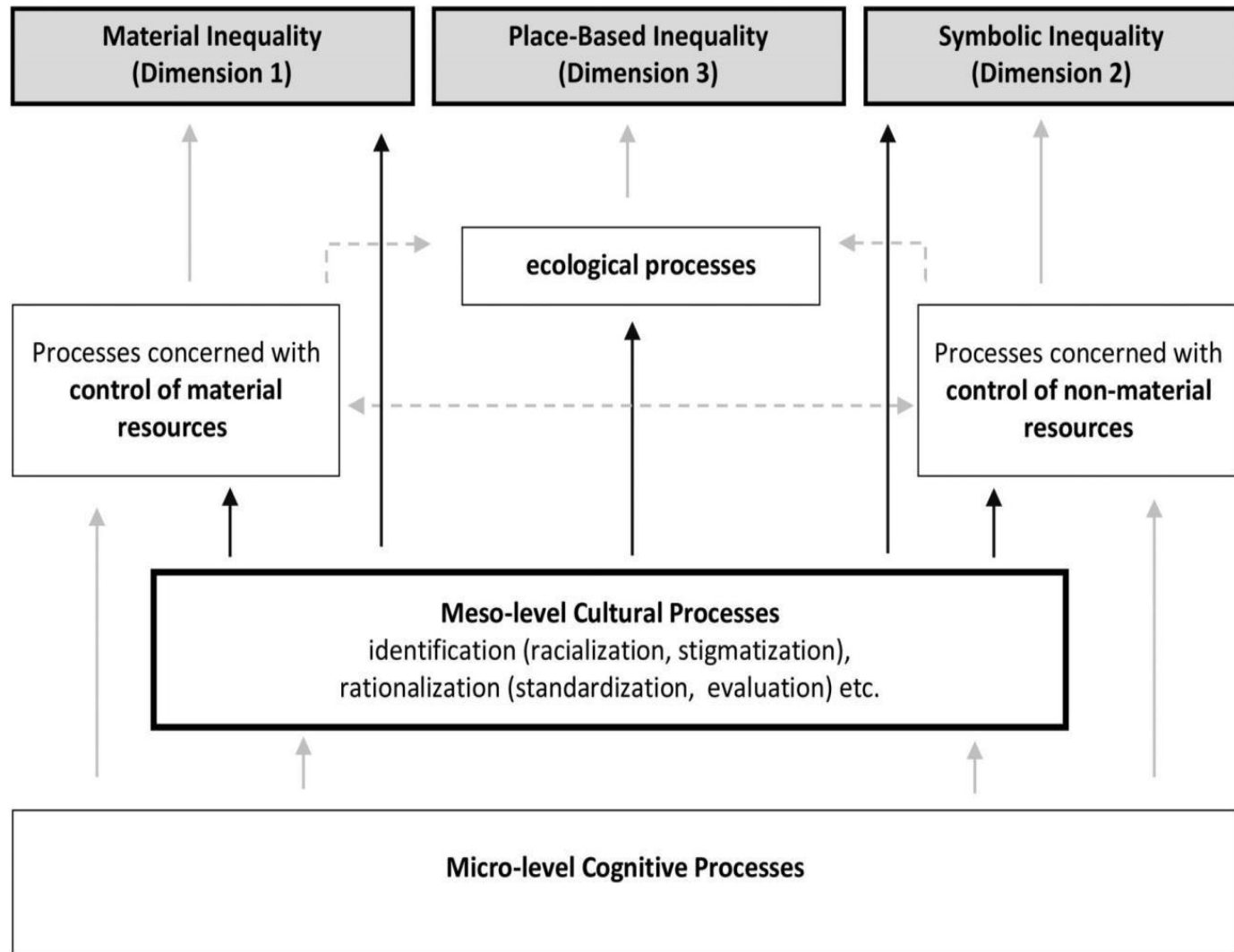
- Qualitative study using lived experience storytelling
- **Phase 1:** 5 ethnic minority and refugee community organisations in Southwest London UK, recruited 27 volunteer community voice champions (CVCs)
- Cycle of 12 collaborative, community experience-focused workshops
- **Phase 2:** 141 individual lived experience stories collected from community members
- Thematically analysed using inductive and deductive coding (Braun & Clark, 2023)
- Emergent themes sense-checked with CVCs

## Who are Community Voice Champions?

- ✓ 'Voice' of their communities through their own lived experience, and collecting stories, opinions, feedback from their communities
- ✓ Volunteers to participate throughout the project
- ✓ Payment for time given and travel costs
- ✓ Induction, including mental health awareness, and ongoing training throughout study



# Theory of Cultural Processes and Causal Pathways to Social Inequalities (Lamont et al., 2014)



**Material Inequality :** Physical, housing, food, resources, transport

**Place-Based Inequality:** Neighbourhood effects, isolation, opportunities, access to services

**Symbolic Inequality:** Cultural practices, stigma, invisible evidence, language, beliefs, values

# Results

Themes	Sub-themes
<b>Mental health and stigma</b>	Challenge of belonging as a migrant
	Misunderstandings around mental health
	Taboo, shame and silence
<b>Culture and nature as sanctuary for mental health</b>	Peacefulness
	Stress relief
<b>Community knowledge and access needs</b>	Restricted knowledge of assets and their benefits
	Practical concerns relating to their specific cultural needs
<b>Uninvited, discriminated, and mistrustful</b>	Estranged and uninvited
	Discriminatory practices
	Unknown rules
	Mistrust of institutions
<b>Community connection, belonging and resilience</b>	Welcomed, valued and belonging
	Spiritual and religious influences
	Community connection and resilience
	Community-led mediation

# Mental health and stigma

- Loss of place and identity
- Challenge of trying to fit in
- Isolation
- Misunderstandings around mental health language and meaning
- Taboo, shame and silence



As refugees have to grapple with loss of identity, loss of place so there is a huge importance for creating a feeling of belonging and home here. (CVC 16)

There's so many individuals in the community suffering silently, because it's a taboo, again a taboo, so hide these situations from your families. (CVC 6)

# Culture and nature as sanctuary for mental health

- Escape from struggles and stress
- Peacefulness
- Reflection
- Calmness and clarity of mind



The park and community centre near me...Birds nest in the trees, ducks swim along the water and sometimes, I see fish jumping. I stand on a little bridge, listening to the gentle sound of the water as it flows over rocks and under the bridge. It's so calming, like the water is washing my worries away. Here, I can breathe and feel at peace. (CVC 5, Community member story)

# Community knowledge and access needs

- Limited awareness of cultural and green spaces, and it's mental health benefits
- Access barriers centred on inequalities:
  - safety, language, cost, transport

And they were not aware of that, you know, going outside of the for example, parks helps your mental health or you know how you feel about yourself.  
(CVC 18)

I think why those of ethnic minority communities they go with numbers is because of that discrimination. Because if you're by yourself you could be an easy target. [CVC 18]



# Uninvited, discriminated, and mistrustful

- Estranged and uninvited
- Unwelcome
- Discriminatory practices
- Unknown rules and behaviour requirements
- Mistrust of institutions

For us it would be things like where they think there won't be any racism or Islamophobia, especially, you know, with the riots....there were so many women who used to go to the park together, mums after dropping children off to school, the mums would get together and go to parks. They completely stopped that. (CVC 3)

Some talked about feeling like there's nowhere truly theirs, where they can express their culture, creativity, or just take a moment to breathe...Imagine if we had more spaces where everyone felt welcome...(CVC 19)



# Community connection, belonging and resilience

- Collective identity, cohesion, and connections
- Sharing cultural foods, traditions and nostalgic memories
- Spiritual and religious influences
- Community-led activities create welcoming cultural and green spaces
- Community-based resilience

After my knee operation, life felt lonely and difficult. Everyday tasks were hard, and I missed feeling connected. Then I heard about a community gardening group...from the moment I arrived, everyone was warm and welcoming...many of the people there spoke my language, understood my background (CVC 5, Community member)

We actually do a picnic in the park, where all faiths come together, and we have the hub community where we actually have food, and everyone sort of mingles and talks. [CVC 6]

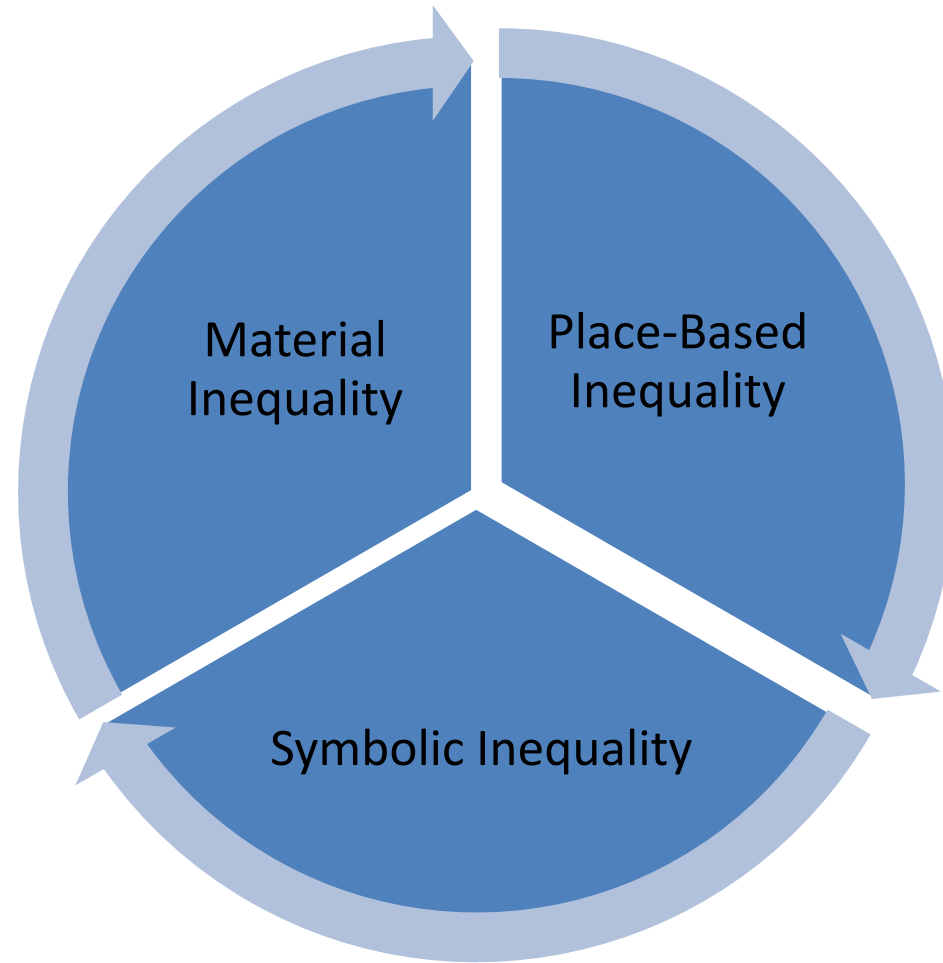


# Discussion

- Stigma & Silence: Mental health remains taboo, compounded by migration stressors
- Belonging heals: Safe cultural and natural spaces foster identity, connection, and resilience
- Unequal Access: Barriers (safety, cost, language, discrimination) persist despite availability
- Access matters: Barriers are structural inequities, not individual failings
- Community Power: Belonging and resilience arise when communities co-create and lead activities
- Community voices count: Solutions work when communities shape and lead them
- Institutions & Trust: Formal services often seen as exclusionary; community-based spaces provide sanctuary
- Abundance, not deficit: Underserved groups are resource-rich, not resource-poor

# Discussion

- **Community knowledge & access needs**



- **Culture and nature as sanctuary for mental health**
- **Community connection, belonging and resilience**

- **Mental health and stigma**
- **Community knowledge and access needs**
- **Uninvited, discriminated, and mistrusted**
- **Community connection, belonging and resilience**

# Conclusion

- Shift from individual treatment models to community-led, place-based, culturally attuned approaches
- Nature and culture offer sensory, social, and spiritual benefits but require safety and access
- Abundance mindset: recognise community strengths, knowledge, and creativity as resources
- Partnerships between institutions and communities are essential to dismantle barriers and build trust

<https://abundanceproject.myblog.arts.ac.uk/>



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