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Hargreaves, Janet and Golding, Berenice

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Humanitarian nursing with Médecins Sans Frontières: an oral history project.

In 2012 I was fortunate to be awarded a National Teaching Fellowship by the Higher Education Academy in the UK. My route to becoming a university lecturer had been through nursing and I had developed an interest in nursing history. I also had great respect for the work of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). I therefore decided to use my grant to undertake a project researching MSF nurses if MSF would allow this: They did. MSF [also known as ‘Doctors without Borders’] is a large, multinational organisation offering medical aid in areas of conflict and natural disaster. Formed in 1971 in France it was created on the “belief that all people have the right to medical care regardless of gender, race, religion, creed or political affiliation, and that the needs of these people outweigh respect for national boundaries” (msf.org.uk). There are now regional offices all over the world. MSF UK was opened in the early 1990s, which gave a starting date to the period of time explored in this project. The nurses offered a window into the life of a nurse working for MSF at that time and thus some insight into the organisation itself, although no attempt has been made to explore MSF in detail. In addition, the histories include eye witness reports of involvement in humanitarian missions all over the world. MSF life. Beyond these three questions few prompts were offered. The listening guide was used to aid analysis of the text due to its multi-layered approach to understanding and analysis: ‘The Listening Guide method comprises a series of steps, which together are intended to offer a way of tuning into the polyphonic voice of another person.’ i

Multiple ‘listenings’ / readings of the text are advocated ii: firstly for the plot which parallels to other methods of thematic analysis that are looking broadly for themes, gaps, surprises. Second is to read specifically for the use of ‘I’ ‘which involves listening for the ‘self’ within the context of the story being told iii and by extrapolating phrases where ‘I’ is used; in some instances the ‘I’ is used to create ‘I’ poems. More layers of analysis follow when using the guide, but are not discussed further here. Five thematic groups are identified: ‘becoming’, ‘being’ and ‘leaving’ MSF; dreams [the ‘dream job’, ‘romance’, ‘nightmares’ and ‘impossible dreams’]; nursing identity and humanitarianism.

There is congruence with some of the motivations of humanitarian workers in the 19th century identified by Gill iv as: Honing professional expertise; Evangelism; Adventure and Moral citizenship. In addition there is a strong association with the motivations of MSF workers explored by Fox:

“ ... idealism, altruism, moral indignation, a commitment to social justice, a sense of adventure, the desire to ‘escape an uncomfortable situation back home’ or to ‘put the past behind’ one, a search for self-fulfilment and a ‘because we can’ spirit of pragmatism “ (Fox, 2014 p 19)

At the outset I asked my colleague, Dr. Berenice Golding, to collaborate with me on the analysis and development of this project which has added greatly to the thematic development and to my enjoyment. We are both indebted to MSF for their support, to the Higher Education Academy for my Fellowship grant, and most especially to the seven nurses who so freely and eloquently shared their lives.

Janet Hargreaves [j.hargreaves@hud.ac.uk] & Berenice Golding [ b.golding@hud.ac.uk ]

University of Huddersfield, UK

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i On the Listening Guide: A voice-centered relational method. Gilligan, Carol; Spencer, Renée; Weinberg, M. Katherine; Bertsch, Tatiana Camic, Paul M. (Ed); Rhodes, Jean E. (Ed); Yardley, Lucy (Ed), (2003). Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design. , (pp. 157-172). Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association, xvi, 315 pp


