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Original Citation

Smith, Kate (2015) Stories Told By, For, and About Women Refugees: Engendering Resistance. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, 14 (2). pp. 461-469. ISSN 1492-9732

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Stories Told By, For, and About Women Refugees: Engendering Resistance

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Introduction

In this paper I discuss some of the ways women's narratives reflect how they make sense of seeking asylum² and how narratives can become a means of resistance. The interview data comes from a qualitative study³ looking at the in-depth narratives of seventeen women who had all made a claim for asylum in the United Kingdom (UK). The women who participated had been living in the UK for different periods of time, ranging from a couple of months to seven years. Aged between early twenties to mid-fifties, they came from fourteen different countries of origin. I utilised an in-depth narrative approach to interviewing women which offered a number of distinct advantages: allowing for women's narratives to be the focus of the study; capturing the particularity, complexity and richness of each woman's story; and highlighting women's agency in storytelling (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, 2003). Interviews lasted between one and a half to three hours and were conducted in a wide range of different locations in the UK.

Grounded in women's stories, I analysed the data using the Listening Guide (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, 2003). This feminist method offers a profoundly in-depth approach to analysing narratives, emphasising the relational nature of



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²The term 'asylum seeker' used in this study include women who have made a claim for asylum under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, regardless of the legal determination on their claim.

³This study was developed from PhD research that was funded by an Economic and Social Research Council studentship.

research. Founded on sequential listenings⁴ (Gilligan et al, 2003) the Listening Guide requires the researcher to listen to each transcript at least four different ways. Offering a careful and critical way to analyse narratives, the radical potential of the Listening Guide is found within the different listenings which help the researcher to recognise the interdependency of intimate and wider social relations within which stories are embedded (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, 2003). The complexity and context of women's stories can be heard and understood by using the Listening Guide, in contrast with more traditional analysis that often creates categories or themes to describe women's situations (Andrijasevic, 2010).

In practical terms, I approached each listening using a different coloured pencil, tracing elements within the transcript to render visible what I was hearing in each woman's story (Brown, 2001; Gilligan et al, 2003). In the first listening, I attended to the overall transcript to make sense of what the story was about, as well as considering my relationship to the participant, documenting my reflexive responses to their story (Doucet, 2008; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). In the second listening, I considered the first-person statements, seeking to elevate the ways each woman spoke about herself before speaking about her (Doucet, 2008). In the third listening, I focussed on the woman's relationships, close and intimate as well as broader social relations, examining how connections might be enabling or constraining (Brown, 2001), autonomous or dependent (Brown and Gilligan, 1993). In the final listening, I attended to the broader contexts and dominant narratives that shaped women's stories (Frank, 1995; Gilligan et al, 2003). This listening was particularly helpful for understanding some of the ways in which women's stories reflected, appropriated, disrupted and resisted dominant narratives about women seeking asylum.

Narratives and Resistance

Powerful stories about refugees in the UK have become a vehicle for the ceaseless vilification of people seeking asylum and virulent asylophobia (Cohen, 2002; McGhee, 2005). Public perceptions about refugees are primarily represented as male (Freedman, 2008), overlooking women's stories and allowing for men's stories to be the dominant narratives told about refugee lives (Hunt, 2008; Crawley, 2000). When women refugees are discussed in policy, they are habitually storied through generic accounts of sexual violence and typified as vulnerable victims (Freedman, 2008; Hajdukowski-Ahmed, 2009; Kapoor, 2004). Women asylum seeker's own stories rarely enter public and policy discussion.

Feminist researchers who are interested in women's stories have often turned to the potential of narrative to contest and disrupt dominant narratives told about women's lives (Haraway, 1988; Gilligan et al, 2003). Privileging stories told by women, whilst acknowledging narratives as situated knowledge and partial

⁴The word 'listening' is used in order to capture the notion of 'reading' a transcript as if listening to the participant's story (Doucet, 2008).

perspectives, this paper demonstrates the value of women's understandings of their lives (Frank, 1995; Haraway, 1988). Listening to women's own accounts of their lives, gaps were identified in relation to dominant narratives about women seeking asylum. Women's own accounts constantly negotiated and displaced dominant narratives (Andrijasevi, 2010).

As a researcher, listening to women's narratives was a form of resistance, challenging the formation of dominant narratives which have been told *for* and *about* people seeking asylum and refugees (Kapoor, 2004). To this end, the Listening Guide, known as a: "resisting listener's guide" (Brown and Gillian, 1993, p. 16), can support researchers to resist dominant narratives by bringing subjectivities to bear on the notion of the universality of women's stories. Including women seeking asylum was an attempt to address some of the ways in which women have been overlooked in dominant narrative formation.

In telling and listening, narratives create meaning and help to make sense of our lives (Frank, 1995). Creating a space for women to tell stories potentially emphasises the narrative ways women resist, rework and are resilient (Katz, 2004) in their different situations across the globe. At its most useful, a nuanced understanding of resistance is conceptualised as relationally interdependent and entwined with power (Bosworth, 1999). However scholars have, at times, rendered resistance an empty category without meaning by identifying almost every action as political and every possible activity as resistance (Scott, 1985; Sparke, 2008). To reconcile and retain the usefulness of the concept of resistance, Cindi Katz (2004) provides valuable understandings about resistance, reconfiguring analysis and contextualising accounts. Resistance is identified by nuances of resistances and outlined in three related concepts: resilience, reworking, resistance (Katz, 2004). Katz (2004) identifies overt resistance which attempts to achieve emancipatory change, opening up possibilities of liberating agendas and transformative practices. Also, a subtle framework of resistance conceptualised as reworking - negotiations and transgressions to improve aspects of individual's situations, as well as resilience - endurance and survival, albeit within oppressive and discriminatory situations (Katz, 2004). Whilst reworking and resilience do not fundamentally change or revolutionise power-relations, both concepts provided a complex and nuanced understanding of resistance used within the analysis of the narratives of this study.

Engendering Resistance

Women spoke about refugees as dehumanised and marginalised across the globe. They outlined events where they felt reduced and discredited by others because they were refugees:

Feelings of being rejected and unwelcome: to be a refugee is really painful "... you do not belong (Z).

The vilification of people seeking asylum in the UK was deeply problematic for women and they collaborated in the reification of stories about the victimisation of women refugees. These stories served to defy the vilification of refugees and legitimise themselves. Legal protection hinges on the ways in which a person seeking asylum establishes their persecution and recognition as a refugee (Kea and Roberts-Holmes, 2013). Expressing consciousness about their victimisation, women elaborated extensively about gendered, political, cultural and historical abuse and violence in the UK and across the globe:

When the police caught me they raped me. They beat me. That's when I lost my tooth (Anne-Laure).

For some women, persecution and abuse was seen as still very much part of their present and everyday lives, producing a sense of women refugees as wounded storytellers (Frank, 1995). Women talked about seeking sustainable and durable solutions to their protection needs. Claiming asylum was storied as an act of reworking their situations in relation to persecution and abuse, highlighting concepts embedded in international frameworks of protection:

I feel I can do something out of that status [refugee] “...” legal protection (Precious).

From the standpoint of women living in the UK, where the vilification of refugees is highly visible, the meaning of becoming a refugee was profound. Yet some women had been refused asylum and were not legally classified refugees⁵. The impact of legal decisions on a woman's asylum claims had very tangible consequences. Frequently resistant, women outlined the ways in which they felt they had been denied their entitlement to legal protection:

I found the interview quite misleading “...” I feel they only find a loophole, anywhere where they can find a loophole to say no (Naomi).

Challenging the legitimacy of the UK Government decisions, women told resistant stories, suggesting the conduct of asylum interviews lacked basic care in engaging with their asylum claims:

The judge when we went to court yes the judge he called me a liar “...” this hatefully untrue (Bintou).

Despite being aware of the precarious position of being refused asylum, women mobilised further resistance strategies. Outlining the qualities of being a refugee, implicit within legal definitions, women claimed for themselves the identity of being a refugee.

Women's stories disrupt dominant narratives that the UK asylum system is underpinned by the principle of offering protection to 'genuine' asylum seekers

⁵The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees is the key legal document in defining who is a refugee.

(Kea and Roberts-Holmes, 2013). The term refugee was situated through women's stories of persecution and violence and women's desire to be understood and to establish their legitimacy as refugees.

I never hear about asylum here in UK (May).

Women offered accounts of structural constraints on their lives, often with limited access to protection in legal, social or political forms:

My father forced my sister into a forced marriage "... my mum was there and nothing she would have said would have stopped it (Baelli).

Emphasising resistance through reworking their situations, women spoke of: arranging visas and flights; engaging with smugglers and paying money for transit; and obtaining documentation to be able to travel. Highlighting the extremely limited choices in their lives, women told stories of resilience, accounts of endurance and survival which exposed being coerced or physically forced by traffickers for sexual and domestic exploitation. One woman gave an account of being brought by family members for an arranged marriage, relocated to the UK as a child travelling on an adult passport. Several women gave accounts of being relocated within the UK by traffickers, family or within the asylum system of dispersal.

Despite fleeing persecution and violence, some of the women in this study were unaware of the concept of international protection and did not know there was an asylum system when they entered the UK:

I was originally running away and to be away from whatever was going through. I never knew about asylum (Naomi).

That man told me, 'do you want claim asylum?' I said, 'what is asylum?' I don't know. I never ever know what is asylum (Jen).

Reinterpreting meanings of voluntary and involuntary categories of migration, some of which have criminalised women (Andrijasevi, 2010), women's stories disrupted dominant narratives about seeking asylum in the UK. What emerged from women's own stories were a range of complex social circumstances where women were not complicit in their abuse and persecution, but spoke of resilience and reworking their situations, engaging in stories about the smallest activities. Women revealed that treating categories of migrants and separating out those who have choices/options and those who have less choices/less options potentially renders invisible the resistances of women, particularly nuanced stories of reworking and resilience (Katz, 2004). As seeking asylum shapes women's stories of victimisation, so too do stories of resistance.

They will send you home (Gloria).

Cross-border movements have long been associated with power relations: the power to keep in or out (Mitchell, 1997, p.101). Women's stories of movements across, between and within borders highlighted transgression in relation to

powerful constructions of state borders and national boundaries (Mitchell, 1997). Women gave accounts of how they resisted claiming asylum in the UK:

I am ten years in the UK “...” only then I claim asylum (Bintou).

Demonstrating the complexity of the decision to claim asylum in the UK, women argued that they made difficult choices about reworking their situations without regularising their immigration status. Despite increasingly restrictive domestic immigration policies in the UK, women found ways to evade risks associated with UK border controls and the asylum system, suggesting their autonomy (and their children’s) was a safer choice. Faced with a complex history of irregular immigration status in the UK, women resisted the necessitation to tell their story as part of the UK asylum system (Bögner et al, 2010):

No, I will not tell you my business. It’s too painful to tell you my business (Jen).

Even when the concept of asylum was known to women, different factors influenced the timing of women’s decisions about when to claim asylum. Bintou felt she had exhausted all other ways of protecting herself and her children, claiming asylum on the advice of her solicitor. Caroline’s health concerns were so extreme that she felt she had no option but to claim asylum:

It was all I could do [claim asylum] after eight years “...” so sick.

Jen was deeply mistrustful of the lack of provisions for protection from her very powerful husband and family:

My life is in danger “...” can’t protect me.

Gloria felt ambivalence about claiming asylum. She spoke about concerns regarding risks associated with disclosure about her sexuality, as well as detention, dispersal and surveillance within the UK asylum system:

Naturally I didn’t come to claim asylum “...” people were saying ‘oh, don’t go there. If you go there they will arrest you “...” send you away “...” It [claiming asylum] was a nightmare and that’s how things became worse.

Restricted choices and opportunities potentially characterise the situation of women who do not regularise their immigration status (Andrijasevic, 2010). Yet it was precisely within the asylum system that women perceived risks and limitations. Claiming asylum in the UK pertains to offer safety, but women revealed how the asylum system may be ineffectual in their lives, often creating dangerous and persecutory situations. Women’s stories disrupt dominant narratives which position the UK as a benevolent and tolerant defender of human rights (McGhee, 2005). Dominant narratives told about and for women seeking asylum, do not take account of the ways in which women are resilient in their choices about safety and protection, reworking their situations, regardless of their immigration status in the UK.

Conclusion

The Listening Guide approach used in this study offers insight into our potential role as researchers to resist homogenising women's stories and making generalisations about their lives. Using the Listening Guide is extremely time-consuming and labour intensive (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998) however it provides an opportunity for researchers to move into a relational space, helping us to listen with care and to better understand women's stories (Andrijasevi, 2010; Doucet, 2008). I call attention to the potential of researchers to listen to stories told *by* women seeking asylum to contextualise women's stories and better understand the complexity of the lives of women seeking asylum. Grounding academic activity in the practical struggles of women's lives, the Listening Guide approach can affirm women as political, economic and social participants with complex and at times contradictory stories to tell, recognising that stories are always partial and subjective perspectives of life (Frank, 1995).

The gaps in our knowledge of women asylum seeker's lives are huge. This study exposes some of the limitations of dominant narratives told for and about women seeking asylum, raising questions about whose interests are served by certain representations (Hajdukowski-Ahmed, 2008). Representation of women seeking asylum through dominant narratives emphasise how narrow understandings potentially sustain and perpetuate women's persecution, limiting their opportunities for protection through risks associated with UK border controls and the asylum system. Women seeking asylum in the UK are defined and judged in relation to dominant narratives and associated stories of women's victimisation. These forms of power elicit stories of resistance.

Women seeking asylum in the UK tell diverse stories about resilience, reworking and resistance (Katz, 2004) highlighting diverse and inventive ways of coping and making sure their lives continue. To construct oneself as resisting may be crucial to women's sense of self and the stories by which we live (Smith, 2013). Women's narratives suggest we should rethink and redefine the ways we tell stories about women seeking asylum and the dominant narratives told about and for women seeking asylum in the UK.

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