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### Original Citation

Hargreaves, Janet and Golding, Berenice (2015) Humanitarian nursing with Médecins Sans Frontières: an oral history project. In: 32nd Annual AAHN Nursing & Healthcare History Conference, 17-20th September 2015, O'Callaghan Alexander Hotel, Dublin, Ireland. (Unpublished)

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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 offer 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 in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The aim of this project was to better understand nurses' motivations for engaging in humanitarian work, particularly where no immediate threat of war or invasion is present and in the absence of overt religious or nationalistic motivations. In so doing the project offers insights into nursing identity and the place of humanitarianism in nursing lives and practice. Secondary aims were to explore nurses' contribution to MSF and their experience and engagement in the humanitarian crises of the 1990s and early 2000s.

Following ethical approval from the University of Huddersfield and support to access participants from MSF UK seven oral histories were recorded in 2013; each in a single sitting. They were asked to recount their pathway to becoming a nurse and then subsequently volunteering with MSF; their experience of working for MSF; and their post-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.'<sup>i</sup>

Multiple '*listenings*' / readings of the text are advocated<sup>ii</sup>: 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<sup>iii</sup> and by extrapolating phrases where 'I' is used; in some instances the 'I's are 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 19<sup>th</sup> century identified by Gill<sup>iv</sup> 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)<sup>v</sup>

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.

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<sup>i</sup> 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

<sup>ii</sup> Carol Gilligan The Listening Guide Method of Psychological Inquiry *Qualitative Psychology* 2015 *Qualitative Psychology*, American Psychological Association Vol. 2, No. 1, 69–77

<sup>iii</sup> Brown, L.M., & Gilligan, C 1992. *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girl's Development*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press

<sup>iv</sup> Gill, R., 2013. *Calculating compassion. Humanity and relief in war Britain 1870-1914*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

<sup>v</sup> Fox, R C (2014) *Doctors without borders: Humanitarian quests, impossible dreams of Médecins Sans Frontières*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.