

Stories as Lived Experience: Narratives in Forced Migration Research

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Stories are part of everyday life and constitute means for actors to express and negotiate experience. For researchers, they provide a site to examine the meanings people, individually or collectively, ascribe to lived experience. Narratives are not transparent renditions of 'truth' but reflect a dynamic interplay between life, experience and story. Placed in their wider socio-political and cultural contexts, stories can provide insights into how forced migrants seek to make sense of displacement and violence, re-establish identity in ruptured life courses and communities, or bear witness to violence and repression. The researcher must pay particular attention to his/her own role in the production of narrative data and the representation of lived experience as text.

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Introduction

Narrative methods have a long tradition within a range of scholarly fields, reflecting different theoretical paradigms and research interests over the years. Life histories, one of the more established narrative genres, have been employed to illuminate such diverse aspects of human life as historical processes, psychological development, cultural patterning and literary writing. In anthropology, personal narratives have mostly been subsumed within the larger body of data and integrated into the analysis. When published as independent texts, they have mostly illustrated processes of social change (e.g. Lewis 1959; Mintz 1960) or given voice to social categories made invisible in conventional ethnographies (e.g. Myerhoff 1978; Freeman 1979; Shostak 1981). A renewed interest in life stories and personal narratives emerged in the early 1980s, as researchers critical of the realist tradition of representing lives and cultures turned to an interpretive narrative approach to explore lived experience and the subjective dimension of social life. Echoing debates on ethnographic authority, so often taken for granted by anthropologists, they were also more self-conscious about the power relations attending to the production of biographical texts.

In the field of forced migration, narratives have also been important to researchers, not seldom relied upon as the only means we have of knowing something about life in times and places to which we have little other access. With the more interpretive approach, narratives have become interesting also for what they can tell us about how people themselves, as ‘experiencing subjects’, make sense of violence and turbulent change. From personal accounts we may also glean the diversity behind over-generalized notions of ‘the refugee experience’. For these and other reasons that will be outlined in this article, narratives are vital in the research process, but also offer considerable challenges as a methodology. I will discuss these strengths and limitations of narratives and their relevance in refugee work. I will do so against the backdrop of the epistemological and ethical debates that have been with us in the social sciences, and in ethnography in particular, for over a decade. Essentially, these concern how we can know something about other people’s experiences and how we can represent them in ways that do them justice.

Understanding Experience through its Expressions

Narrative analysis as used in much qualitative research today is grounded in the phenomenological assumption that meaning is ascribed to phenomena through being experienced and, furthermore, that we can only know something about other people’s experiences from the expressions they give them (e.g. Schutz 1972: 99–100). In the dynamic interplay between experience and expression, experience gives rise and form to narratives, but it is also organized and given meaning in the telling. The relationship of both to reality, following Bruner (1986), is a complex one. It means that, analytically, we need to distinguish between *life as lived*, the flow of events that touch on a person’s life; *life as experienced*, how the person perceives and ascribes meaning to what happens, drawing on previous experience and cultural repertoires; and *life as told*, how experience is framed and articulated in a particular context and to a particular audience (Bruner 1986). Past experience is always remembered and interpreted in the light of the present as well as by the way that the future is imagined. What is remembered and told is also situational, shaped not least through the contingencies of the encounter between narrator and listener and the power relationship between them (e.g. Crapanzano 1980; Skultans 1999). We need to add a fourth level, *life as text*, the researcher’s interpretation and representation of the story. The nature of the enquiry as well as the personal experience and cultural assumptions of the researcher are all filters through which the story is sifted and represented as text. As a result, an experience is never directly represented but edited at different stages of the process from life to text. As published text, the story is exposed to a different audience and to further interpretation. Ethnographic writers have sought to resolve the problem of authority of voice, with variable success, to let the final text convey the

complexities of joint production (e.g. Dwyer 1982; Behar 1993; Caplan 1997).¹ Culture is thus central to lived experience and to narrativity, not only in the making of a meaningful story by a particular subject, but also in the ways that others understand and retell that story.

Put simply, narrative is a form in which activities and events are described as having a meaningful and coherent order, imposing on reality a unity which it does not inherently possess. Narrative also inevitably reduces experience which, in its vitality and richness, always far exceeds the expression which a person can give it (Bruner 1986). Thus, stories cannot be seen as simply reflecting life as lived, but should be seen as creative constructions or interpretations of the past, generated in specific contexts of the present. For instance, a therapeutic, legal or research setting, each with its specific purpose, idiom and set of power relations, would produce somewhat different renditions of the same event. Bosnian women in a Croatian refugee camp were talking to each other about their experiences of war as an important way to relieve their suffering (Mimica 1997). Recounting the same experience for a different purpose, as in an asylum hearing with a more sceptical audience assessing the story with a different set of criteria, would necessarily affect the narration, requiring a more strategic presentation of self. As representation, rather than documentation of reality, narratives become methodologically more complex, but also open up theoretically more interesting possibilities: for one, they make room for a more dynamic view of the individual as subject, acting in the world and reflecting on that action. As such, they also provide an opportunity or entry point to grasping the interplay between self and society, letting us see the 'subjective mapping of experience, the working out of a culture and a social system' that is often obscured in more typifying accounts (Behar 1990: 225). They can tell us something about how social actors, from a particular social position and cultural vantage point, make sense of their world.

Narratives may emerge as responses to more formal interview questions on a particular topic or may be observed in social interaction in natural settings. They may also unfold spontaneously as part of informal conversations during fieldwork. The historical narratives in Malkki's research with Hutu refugees in Tanzania were told

in a wide variety of contexts, sometimes by familiar informants and at other times by more casual acquaintances and even strangers. Narratives emerged, not only in homes, but also on lorry drives, during walks along forest paths, in the fields while people were working...and in numerous other circumstances. Conversations in these diverse settings about everyday topics, personal circumstances, and immediate concerns often (indeed, usually) led to broader, historicizing reflections (1995: 49).

Narrative methodology actually taps into a common feature of social interaction everywhere: as part of everyday life, people narrate their experiences to those around them, negotiating their meaning, evaluating

their significance, assessing the next step for action. In doing so, people draw on the social relations and cultural repertoires at their disposal, making experience inter-subjective and 'cultural to the core' (Good 1994: 139). As such interactive sites of social life, narratives offer an opportunity for researchers to examine these processes. While much of the focus has been on individual narratives elicited by a researcher, the stories which people as a community produce together are, as will be seen, a particularly useful area of inquiry in forced migration. There are also particular insights to be gained by juxtaposing collective and individual expressions.

Understanding Narrative in Context

According to Dilthey, experience 'urges toward expression, or communication with others', especially those 'formative and transformative experiences which erupt from and disrupt' everyday routinized life, and thus evokes the need for meaning (in Turner 1986: 35, 37). Conceptualized in this way, narrative can help us explore the radical discontinuities in the lives of displaced people, as well as the struggle to make sense of disruptive change. However, such experiences and the uncertainties they entail also urge displaced people towards engaging with and acting on the predicaments they face. Thus, stories are important sites not only for negotiating what has happened and what it means, but also for seeking ways of going forward. In such a broadened methodological perspective, stories are reconstitutive in the way they organize experience, give it unity and meaning, but they also, in a more pragmatic perspective, form part of purposive and meaningful action to influence the outcome. Story-telling in itself, as a way for individuals and communities to remember, bear witness, or seek to restore continuity and identity, can be a symbolic resource enlisted to alleviate suffering and change their situation. In her study of how people deal with the vicissitudes of life and illness in Uganda, Whyte similarly draws attention to the fact that people are not just creating themselves through narrative or reaffirming social norms through ritual, but also actively going about addressing misfortune and managing uncertainty in many other ways as well (Whyte 1997). Therefore, to grasp the predicaments of refugees, narratives are necessarily part of a more holistic approach, including access to social interaction. Listening to the stories people tell one another and observing the various ways in which they engage with their situation as refugees adds important context and depth of understanding to the stories elicited by the researcher.

There is an important difference between conventional stories and those of many refugees. While 'predicament, human striving, and an unfolding in time toward a conclusion is central to the syntax of all human stories' (Good 1994: 145), in many refugee situations, the outcome is far from given. Refugees are in the midst of the story they are telling, and uncertainty and liminality, rather than progression and conclusion, are the order of the day.

Narratives, as should be obvious by now, are not transparent renditions of reality but they call for our interpretation.² This means that, to understand the stories people tell us and one another about who they are and their pasts, we must relate them to the social and political contexts that have shaped and continue shaping the circumstances of their lives and which engage their commitments. Organizing themes and metaphors of such stories serve as important guides for analysis, which, for anthropologists in particular, must take account of the wider discourses and cultural idioms through which experience is given structure and meaning by the people involved. In Knudsen's accounts of Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong transit camps (1993), 'chicken wings' was the expression refugees used to refer to the negative outcome of the screening process, signifying the inability to fly; on another level, however, evident from Knudsen's own fieldwork in those camps, it was a pervasive and portentous metaphor of the fear of rejection and the powerlessness that characterized their situation. In the stories of refugees from El Salvador granted asylum in Sweden, 'life as struggle' and as 'suffering' were common tropes to describe their past and also to capture the difficulties of exile in the present. These themes drew on a pervasive moral discourse in their home country among the poor and members of the political opposition, based on both religious and political visions for change. Life histories and fieldwork in such contexts revealed the gendering of such discourses, with different referents of struggle and suffering for men and women. It was also clear that, in the exile context, they took on new and different meanings for differently positioned actors. The story of a Salvadoran woman demonstrated with particular clarity how experience and its meanings are transformed. In El Salvador (as in many other parts of Latin America), 'suffering' and the sacrifices women make in an environment of violence and poverty is a topic of daily conversations among poor women. Such experience is made meaningful, and provides moral merit, as it is shared and recognized within a local moral world. In exile, struggling with unemployment and social isolation, suffering could no longer be shared, and drew little positive recognition from the host population. Suffering became meaningless as it became socially invisible and, instead of being a source of self-esteem and agency, it subsequently manifested as illness and depression (Eastmond 1996).

Narratives, Variation and 'the Refugee Experience'

Gregory Bateson, in his fieldwork among the Iatmul in New Guinea, once asked a young man of seventeen to describe his life—and so the young man did, starting with birth, through childhood, adolescence, manhood and old age. What he presented was the prescribed life or cultural model, reflecting a community which made no clear distinction between model and an individual's life. (Reynolds and Capps 1976: 10). The anecdote illustrates that narratives are culturally variable as genres of expression. The life history as

a Western genre is based on notions of 'a life' and 'self' as unique and clearly bounded units and cannot be taken for granted in other contexts (e.g. Rosaldo 1976). Furthermore, it reveals the assumptions we make about truth and plausibility as transparent and given categories, rather than as contingent upon the way we perceive the world and what we think we can know about it. From a Western epistemology, the Iatmul life history is not a plausible one, unless we grasp the local rationality of 'life as a one-possibility thing'.

The story can also serve as a reminder of the critique raised against the notion of 'the refugee experience' as a uniform condition and of the tendency to think of refugees as an undifferentiated, essentialized and universal category quite irrespective of the different historical and political conditions of displacement and of the individual differences between people who become refugees (Malkki 1995). While involuntary movement entails change and loss for those displaced, we cannot *a priori* assume what these are, what they mean and how they are best coped with; nor can we assume that the homeland or native village is always the best place to return to. 'Home' and the loss of home may mean different things to individuals from different walks of life from the same country of origin. Malkki's (1995) study of Hutu refugees from Burundi in Tanzania showed how different circumstances of settlement (in camp or scattered in towns) generated different narrative constructions of themselves as refugees and in relation to history. Similarly, Korac (2003) found Bosnians' experience and conceptions of themselves as 'refugees' in Rome and in the Netherlands to be strikingly different in response to different conditions of reception. Thus, while transformation and change are part of the refugee experience, not all change is perceived as loss or defined as problematic or unwelcome by all individuals involved. Nor are refugees necessarily helpless victims, but rather likely to be people with agency and voice.

The narratives of socially positioned actors can promote a greater appreciation of the diversity of experience involved in forced migration, against universalizing and stereotypical descriptions of what it means to be a 'refugee'. As shown above, by juxtaposing individual accounts, we may glean the commonalities in the experiences of a particular group of forced migrants, as well as understand the internal variation among them (e.g. Freeman 1989; Wright and Oñate 1998). In a study of the ways in which exile was construed among Chilean political refugees, life histories revealed the variation of positions subsumed by the official discourse of the movement, and how different interpretations grew out of different life experiences based, among other things, on class and gender. Thus, personal experience may draw on a common history and ideology to be made meaningful, but it may also challenge the collective story and its essentializing tendency: individual stories reflected a changing relationship to the movement over time and said something about the ambiguities and moral dilemmas that these changes entailed for the narrator (Eastmond 1989, 2006).

Stories may also illuminate the reaffirmation of self, in order to contest over-generalized and de-individualizing images promoted in a receiving society or a camp situation. The bureaucratic need for standardized categories in many situations of reception and the focus on the present in much service provision often deny individuality. In such situations,

[I]ndividualities constructed in oral autobiographies are deemed irrelevant by many caseworkers, whereas for the refugee this is the foundation on which a meaningful world may be rebuilt (Daniel and Knudsen 1995: 5).

Presentations of self in the stories of Bosnian refugees settled in Sweden contrasted themselves against the stereotyped image of Bosnians as ‘traumatized victims of war’, emphasizing agency and ability rather than victimization and disability. These drew on familiar cultural models of personhood in former Yugoslavia, but they were made more conscious values in opposition to the over-generalized discourses about refugees in the receiving society (Eastmond 2005).

Disrupted Life Courses and the Narrative Re-creation of Continuity

These variations notwithstanding, displacement often does entail a radical break with familiar conditions of everyday life and requires the re-negotiation of self in relation to new contexts. Several studies have employed narratives to investigate the ways in which forced migrants create a sense of continuity in who they are, linking selves in different ways to time and place. Some of these reveal the struggle involved in creating a coherent narrative of self and the past when the future is highly uncertain or even threatened, as in the case of many asylum-seekers, refugees in camps or those with temporary protection. There are interesting parallels with another genre of personal narratives that enquires into human responses to dramatic and life-turning events. According to medical anthropologist Byron Good, serious illness is often experienced as a rupture of the moral order. The efforts to bring meaning to such events invoke fundamental questions about moral responsibility and the nature of suffering, and about the sources for hope to go forward (Good 1994: 134). Such illness stories struggle towards resolution and imagined ends, in the face of uncertainty. Examining the life histories of Vietnamese refugees in transit camps to see how they coped with radical discontinuity and uncertainty, Knudsen explored the ways in which temporal categories of past, present and future served as a cognitive model for creating continuity in shattered life courses. The refugees, he concluded, kept their minds on the future and sought to establish continuity by linking it to the past.

The quest for meaning, for finding explanation, may be guided by grand narratives of political ideology or religion, providing meaning and hope, but many survivors also struggle without such clear-cut frames for making

sense of social upheaval and atrocities in their home countries, as many stories of Cambodians (Pran 1994; Mortland 1994) or Bosnian refugees (Stefansson 1998; Huttunen 2005) demonstrate. In the ideological narratives of refugee movements and diasporas, the exile present may be collectively portrayed as a liminality, outside normal time and place, an insignificant passage between past and future. The past may be idealized, discursively frozen and the future envisioned as a return not only to the homeland but also to the past (Tapp 1988; Eastmond 1989), suggestive of the utopian syntax in which 'the future is the past' (Vlachos 1978). However, narratives of individual members of such movements also suggest that these authoritative paradigms for transcending the present are not always very helpful given the personal realities of exile extended over time. For some of the Latin American political exiles in my research, while return was the imagined end (both as personal desire and moral imperative) to which the grand narratives point, it was rarely truly an option; this produced a sense of failure for the individual and a growing ambiguity concerning the collective project, so characteristic of diaspora life. Perhaps as a result of the increasingly transnational character of exile life over the years, some of these narratives reflect a dichotomization of self in relation to time and place, in which 'here and there', 'now and then' become cognitive frames for organizing such tensions and ambiguities (Eastmond 1996; cf. Huttunen 2005).

Creating a sense of belonging and 'home', some research suggests, is a matter of constructing a coherent narrative about oneself and one's experiences. The perception of time and history can play a different role in such narratives. Yans-McLaughlin (1990) found that the experience of Jewish immigrants to the USA was made significant through the awareness of the wider, collective history of persecution, whereas Italian immigrants in the study centred more on family relations and the present. Bek-Pedersen and Montgomery (2006) drew a parallel to their own work with young refugees from the Middle East, exploring their experience as refugees and the role of war and violence in their lives through their narratives. For some, a family history of domestic violence and lack of parental buffering produced a problematic focus on the present. For others, in contrast, being connected through their family to a larger narrative of historical persecution provided a positive resource in understanding themselves and their world. The stories illuminate the vital mediating role played by family relations in creating new homes in exile, and underline that there is no linear relationship between exposure to war and poor mental health (*ibid.*)

Authoring Selves: The Narrative Production of Collective Identity

Another relevant genre in understanding refugees' relationship to time and place are the stories that displaced people, as a collectivity, tell themselves, and others, about themselves. As part of a discursive construction

of the past, such narrations are often symbolic strategies of addressing their predicament in the present; as such, they can be unpacked to elucidate a community's understanding of itself. Some of these forms of 'life as told' may reveal not only what people think they are but what they should have been or may yet be (Myerhoff 1986: 262). Barbara Myerhoff (1986) examines such narratives of self as they were staged and performed by a community of elderly Jewish immigrants in California, survivors of the Holocaust but without natural witnesses to their past lives and culture in their present environment. Performed as a parade and a mural, their narrative was a symbolic self-portrait, dramatizing their history and their claim to life and recognition as against their invisibility to the surrounding society and its disdain of them. In the production of a social memory and a common narrative as a community, personal memories may merge with those of others and draw on other previous historical accounts of repression and displacement, some of them learnt in childhood. In 'the two-way traffic between memory and history', referred to by Skultans in her work with Latvian narratives,

living memory of labour camps reverberates with earlier historical accounts of physical oppression and violence against Latvian serfs. Siberian exile during the Stalinist period reiterates other earlier periods of exile under the czars (1999: 172).

Such narratives may enlist ideological, religious or mythical idioms to provide explanation, legitimation and hope. As the district headman of the Dalai Lama's government in exile inaugurated a newly constructed Tibetan refugee village in Nepal, anthropologist Claes Corlin tells us, he did so by carefully recounting their myth of origin as a people, beginning with the creation of their world until they were situated in the present, in the new village. The headman's performance was impressively insightful: his audience had experienced a traumatic time of suppression and tremendous hardships in occupied Tibet, followed by the flight to an insecure existence in a foreign country. Through the myth, the headman placed the refugees and their suffering and chaos in a vast setting of cosmological order and continuity in which they and their very existence were made deeply significant. Exile in Nepal was to be but a temporary, albeit unpleasant, state within the more significant long-term perspective. Buddhism, in its emphasis on reincarnation, provided reassurance, through its extended time perspective of many lives to come (Corlin 1993: 56–57). The Hmong from Laos in Thai refugee camps (Tapp 1988) also relied on a mythical past through traditional legends and narratives in addressing the changing circumstances of their lives and identity. These narratives were part of a creative revitalization of Hmong culture in the camps, also reformulating their history and traditions in the process, to integrate change and emphasize unity in the face of conflict and disruption. In these definitions of self, history and nationhood evolved in response to the particular circumstances of the

camps. Similarly, according to Malkki, the mythico-histories of Hutu refugees who had escaped massacres in Burundi were very much an outcome of a particular historical consciousness created in the camp setting. Through these stories, framed by a nationalist narrative, refugees placed themselves meaningfully in the history that led up to the atrocities and flight from Burundi, and envisioned hope for the future (Malkki 1995).

As stories of a past of displacement, narratives may be a powerful tool to lay claim to a particular place as 'home' also over generations. Memories of forced mobility among the Yaqui in Mexico, told and retold over generations, as well as everyday talk about travel, are at the very heart of their contemporary understandings of themselves as a people with rights to a particular place. 'Discursively, Yaqui land as homeland is reinscribed with every story about displacement, with every tale of triumphant return' (Erickson 2003: 150). Similarly, Palestinian stories of *Al Nakba* (literally, 'the disaster' of dispersal in 1948), told over several generations in a largely oral tradition, attest to the dramatic transformation of Palestinians into a refugee nation. Memories of the home village and images of return, imbued with intense cultural meaning, are the stuff of many such Palestinian stories, told within families and refugee communities. *Al Nakba*, as the core of the collective Palestinian imagination, also serves as a cognitive frame in which each new political crisis and violence is understood as a new disaster (Gren forthcoming). The written literary narratives of Palestinian refugees also seek to counteract the shattering effects of dispersion, united by 'one overriding concern: how to reassemble a continuous recognizably Palestinian discourse' (Siddiq 1995: 88). These literary narratives thus constitute 'one sustained epic quest for return to home(land), self(hood), and nation(hood)' (Siddiq 1995: 89). In a similar quest for continuity, according to Pattie (1997), the Armenian diaspora's collective narrative of the homeland, grounded in the shared history of massacres and deportation, has been a regenerative force of memory and identity over time and great distances. By placing the focus on personal experience and informal aspects of public life, Pattie brings out the diversity of perspectives and reveals the dynamic tension between individual and collective versions of the past.

Muted Memories: Narratives as Testimony

Collective narratives reflect and at the same time shape social memory. While powerful institutions exert influence over what is remembered and what is forgotten and define moral positions in relation to critical events, official narratives are always vulnerable to the destabilizing effects of so called 'historical deposits', experience that contradicts official versions (Connerton 1989: 12, in Skultans 1999). In the words of Ochs and Capps, 'the roar of countervailing stories is ever present, on the edge of recognition' (1996: 33). Memories and alternative stories which are not given explicit voice may live on in other ways, sometimes over a long time. Capturing the tension of such

narrative asymmetries, Skultans refers to narratives drawn from her studies of Latvian memories of collectivization, deportation and exile as 'testimonies'. She found that 'Latvian men and women wanted their lives to bear witness to the wrongs that they had experienced and to the injustices of history' (Skultans 1999: 169). As such, their stories addressed a wider external audience but also served to forge a sense of collective identity and survival as a nation, interweaving their own texts with those of folk culture and earlier historical accounts of mass brutality and state violence. Skultans also noted a marked difference in the way men and women reflected on their past and told their stories. Whereas Latvian men adopted a more 'representational' (or realist, in the terminology used here) approach to events, women employed narratives both to represent the past and to interpret it, describing the personal meaning of such experiences. Both approaches are of course important when analysing narratives given in the spirit of testimony, where 'ignoring their representational purpose would be to invalidate the narrators' (1999: 180). Further, men's narratives were cast in a heroic and historical mode, as lone protagonists, whereas women's stories placed themselves within a relational world, more inclined to provide personal accounts of their experience (1999: 183).

Memories of the past that are muted, distorted or otherwise exiled from public awareness by a new political order can be evoked and made public by political violence many years later. Skultans' findings of memories 'silenced and seldom voiced' resonate with those in my own research with refugees from former Yugoslavia. There, experiences of ethnic violence and mass killings during the Second World War were subdued with the creation of a common Yugoslav identity: in the spirit of 'Brotherhood and Unity' in the new Socialist order, ethno-religious identities were to become (and indeed, for many, became) socially irrelevant. Some of those who grew up in the post-war period remember vaguely hearing stories within the family circle, 'more like a whisper' or 'an aside', about what had happened to relatives and close friends during the war. These stories took on a mythical character, never allowed outside the private sphere. However, with the events of the recent war, they have been resuscitated with new force within nationalist narratives. For the many individuals who remain ambivalent to such recasting of history, these memories have gained new relevance in searching their own pasts for clues to the violent war.

Power may also work on memory and narration in more insidious ways: in the violation of individuals' bodies and minds, traumatic experiences tend to fragment memory, undermine trust, and inhibit expression. Such political and existential dimensions of torture and trauma formed the basis of the 'testimony method' developed as a healing strategy by Chilean psychologists after the military coup in 1973. Thus, trauma narratives were at once documentation and denunciation of political violence and a therapeutic process. A vital dimension of such testimonies was the confirmation of torture as actual reality and as lived experience, to the sufferer and to the

Chilean public. Detailed testimonies transformed something painful into a document which could be useful against the perpetrators. The therapeutic process aimed at reframing the experience in political perspective, as well as integrating it into the larger life story of the individual (Weinstein and Lira 1987, in Agger and Jensen 1997). Nevertheless, even given the political import of such testimonies, the emotional strain of telling them can be great. In my own research with Chilean refugees, I found that telling one's story as political testimony of torture during the Chilean military dictatorship was a moral obligation to the members of the exiled opposition, vital in mobilizing support for their cause, but that doing so was often a harrowing experience for the individual. 'A return to hell', as one informant referred to it, leaving him deeply distraught for weeks. For many of these refugees, it was a struggle between the moral imperative not to forget and the extreme pain of remembering (Eastmond 1989).

Violence and displacement may thus pre-empt stories, constituting an 'experiential field in which narrative falters and fails' (Jackson 2002: 94). Forced movement as a rupture with the familiar social world tends to undermine the premises on which meaningful stories are built. Those who have suffered extreme experiences will often find that these resist narrative ordering and verbal expression. Torture, according to the Chilean psychologists, hits the individual at a deeply personal, existential level. The result may be silence, as pain destroys language (Scarry 1985), or the refusal to represent certain violations of the human body through words, as noted by Das (2003) in her work with victims of the Partition riots of India. Narratives may be monotonous and flat, as in the sketchy stories of Tamil refugees and victims of torture, robbed of vitality and any conviction that they could possibly 'communicate something that was so radically individuated and rendered unshareable' (Daniel 1996: 143, in Jackson 2002: 95). Some survivors remain silent because they need to dissociate themselves from painful memories (Lifton 1988) or fear that their stories will not be believed, or be bearable to the listener; others find that they are simply never asked about them (Skultans 2004; Eastmond 2005).

Narrative Truth and the Politics of Disbelief

The ambiguity and unresolved nature of many refugee situations, in camps or reception centres, also undermine narrative. And yet, in these situations, perhaps more than in others, forced migrants depend on having their stories heard and believed.

Far from the interest of international media, Vietnamese languishing in Hong Kong detention camps urged the researcher: 'perhaps you can take the story of our lives to the outside world. If we are forgotten, all hope is gone' (Knudsen 1992: 136). For an increasing number of asylum-seekers today, their fate depends on their ability to convey their experiences in a way that convinces increasingly sceptical host states of their authenticity.

Asylum determination hearings, in their contexts of radical inequality and uncertainty (Macklin 2006),³ constitute a profoundly challenging context for refugee stories. In the legal–institutional setting, the stories of asylum-seekers become testimony of a different kind than in situations of therapeutic healing or political denunciation. As evidence of claims to protection and admission, related experience must conform not only to the categories of refugee law but also to the ‘metanarratives of truth and credibility’ of the judicial system. The implicit assumption in the legal context, according to Macklin (2006), is that there is a truth there (in the story) and that it can be apprehended. However, as this article has argued, stories are never transparent renditions of reality, but partial and selective versions of it, arising out of social interaction. ‘Narrative truth’ refers to the inescapably imperfect and fluid work of memory, organization and meaning. Narration as purposive action also relies on a certain measure of control and a situation in which, as the Iatmul story illustrated, the criteria of credibility and plausibility are known to both narrator and audience, if not shared by them. The crux of many asylum hearings is that while the criteria for judging a story convincing are usually not fully known to the narrator, the price of failure (i.e. deportation) is enormous. As Showler demonstrates (2006), the process itself is often difficult for claimants to understand. Those assessing the story may have insufficient knowledge of the refugee’s background to make sense of it. Emotions that may be vital clues to lived experience and authenticity may be lost or distorted in translation. Important parts can be muddled and fragmented, and details of dates and places put beyond recall by the pressure of the situation and/or traumatic memory. And yet, understanding refugees’ stories is crucial because the burden of proof rests with the claimant⁴ and external sources such as country reports, psychologists’ certificates, refugees’ own documents or witnesses, are often scarce or unsatisfactory (*ibid.*). Following the radically restrictive policies towards refugees in many European states in recent years, refugees’ stories are increasingly met with suspicion in a growing ‘culture of disbelief’ (Finch 2005), a disbelief which affects both narratives and assessments. Illustrating the crisis of asylum, changing from a political to a humanitarian regime, trauma and serious physical conditions have become the main social currency for admission, according to Fassin and d’Halluin (2005). As the injured body has become the terrain of ‘truth’, medical certificates are replacing refugees’ own words.

Conclusions

As a field of knowledge production, narrative provides a site to examine the meanings which actors ascribe to experience. Many of the complexities of a narrative approach, notably the tension between empirical and interpretive demands, between reality and its representation, are those which most qualitative approaches have to tackle. However, beyond these, forced migration presents special challenges to narrative research.

Violence and displacement, as life-turning events, may 'urge towards expression' but also undermine the premises of narrativity, creating a sense of isolation and mistrust in those victimized. On a different level, political and institutional constraints also often make access problematic. Ethical issues are acute when dealing with individuals who are not in a position to control the fate of their stories, and demand considerably more of the researcher in terms of sensitivity to questions of power, confidentiality and accountability than in many other fields. Representing stories in ways that do narrators justice is not only a general problem of researchers' authority, but one which needs particular attention in relation to vulnerable categories of people. As this article has suggested, there are no simple or satisfactory representational strategies that retain unmediated voices or experiences in the textual version. As Caplan (1997) points out, personal narratives do not resolve the problem of translation, cultural and analytical, so well known from ethnographic research. Freeman, in his life history research, takes this point a step further, arguing that the researcher's role in the creation of a story is not 'an interference with the data, but rather an integral part of it, indeed is the data' (Freeman 1989: 432–433). This role must nevertheless be made as transparent as possible. Proximity to the narrator and to the insider's perspective does not exclude analytic distance, given that interpretations are based on a solid grasp of the larger contexts in which experience and action are embedded. Such stories, properly situated, can rather bring out more clearly the ways in which experience and agency are socially and culturally mediated phenomena.

In all stories, the personal voice is always interwoven with those of many others, and in narrative analysis it necessarily includes that of the researcher. From the perspective of a shared humanity, as Jackson reminds us,

without stories, *without listening to one another's stories*, there can be no recovery of the social, no overcoming of our separateness, no discovery of common ground or common cause (2002: 104–105, italics in original).

Thus, the challenges and limitations of narrative research notwithstanding, we need to continue seeking ways of listening to and representing refugees' experiences, in their great diversity. This is particularly urgent as solidarity with refugees in their plight appears to be giving way to distrust in many parts of the world. As a result, refugees' stories are either not deemed relevant or credible or, increasingly, not heard at all.

1. A compromise in my own work has been to discuss draft versions of text with narrators where possible. Such joint readings have often provided new dimensions of understanding on both sides, illustrating the processual and open-ended character of interpretation (Eastmond 1996).
2. Analytical practices vary across disciplines. For overviews from different scholarly fields, see Langness and Frank (1981); Riesmann (1993); Good (1994).

3. Peter Showler, Audrey Macklin and Don Galloway, all experienced members of the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board, presented these findings at a session of the 10th IASFM Conference in Toronto, Canada in June 2006.
4. In spite of the constraints of verbal accounts, they are more effective than written statements, 'reducing claimants' life histories to dry, objective facts which may or may not capture their reasons for fearing persecution' (Showler 2006: xvi).

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