Creating existential spaces: what do oral history interviews held with Syrian refugee men tell us?

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Abstract

The dominant narratives on refugees evolve around vulnerability and trauma discourse that homogenizes a whole group of individuals as traumatized, therefore, vulnerable, as they exposed to an adversity. It is the self-narratives of refugees that reveal the complexity, uniqueness and totality of each person's experience that can object to this passivation. Oral history in this respect stands as a crucial tool as it creates spaces of existence where refugees can speak freely about their own life stories to the extent and content she/he desires. This small research is a naïve attempt to apply life history approach, and oral history as one of its methodological tool, to psycho-social support at the intersection with refugee studies. Although evolved in different paradigms, this research aims to demonstrate that oral history can also empower refugees since their self-narratives stand as valid sources of reality to challenge the above mentioned discourses, now and then.

Keywords: Adversity-activated development, life history approach, onto-ecological settledness, oral history, refugee

INTRODUCTION

It was 10 years ago, I conducted an oral history interview for the first time. It was with a lady who broke down when speaking about her childhood and as a young university student who had no idea of what to do, I was literally terrified witnessing how a simple narrative of a life story could emotionally break a person. One year later, I saw her at a book launch for the interviews conducted by our research group, they had been published. It was the first of its kind covering self-narratives of a minority group who has been institutionally silenced for years. She recognised me at the launch, looked deep into my eyes and thanked me. The moment I realised the power of self-narratives was when she whispered into my ear and said: *'and now I proved that I exist'*.

This research is a naïve attempt to introduce life histories methodology to psychology at refugee studies and search for possible ways of empowering an individual, not only focusing on the individual *per se*, but also the history and politics that affect an individual's wellbeing with broader implications. It is also not necessarily only for individuals with a defined need of treatment, but also others. As a requisite field research project to successfully complete a *Psychosocial Support and Conflict Transformation Certificate Program* that took place between February and July 2017 by the International Organization for Migration for

psychosocial workers in the humanitarian field working with refugees in Turkey, its aim was to explore the added value of a life history approach in the refugee context as a complementary tool for psychosocial support (PSS). It obviously does not aim to replace existing tools.

In my first experience of oral history, the interviewee broke down and I became paralysed, demonstrated clearly the need of a psychological intervention by a specialist. However, it invites PSS workers to think more inter-disciplinary and explore areas that a narrative can go beyond therapy. I believe these areas can contribute to the wellbeing of an individual by initiating a change in the social and political structures.

One can ask why PSS workers are a target audience of this research. As Schininà argues, the PSS worker's 'work is positioned within a series of systems. The assistance they are providing often responds to erroneous systemic approaches and priorities. Their work is to be aware of this and, wherever possible, question these approaches while continuing to assist individuals in need' (Schininà, 2017, p. 104). Therefore, I believe it is important to understand these discourses by PSS workers and oral

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history is a useful tool to challenge it. To assist with this exploration, I had two research questions:

(1) In which ways could a life history approach be applied to refugee studies with an empowering outcome to individuals interviewed and to general refugee groups?

(2) How could self-narratives of refugees deconstruct the hegemonic discourse on them?

Three themes were explored to address research questions:

(1) Everyday life practices in Syria.
(2) Migration journey to Turkey.
(3) Life stories in Turkey.

The flow of the themes and its relevant questions do not imply any compartmentalisation of the life stories, as pre and post refugee conditions. On the contrary, it aims to be neutral to hear the sequence of life stories, as narrated by the refugees themselves.

Hegemonic narratives on refugees

In his reflections for psychosocial workers, Schininá presents a historical perspective on the healthy and unhealthy migrant myths and offers a framework to conceptualise the transformation of migrants to objects and abjects (Schininá, 2017).

Until the 1980s, the world witnessed regulated influx of low skilled migrants from former colonial countries to the North, as a social mobility strategy, that contributed to the healthy migrant myth. Since the 1980s, the healthy migrant myth has transformed into an unhealthy and vulnerable migrant myth, as worldwide mobility increased, which led to *'the diversification of migrant populations, an increased transnationalism, and a variety of socioeconomic conditions of migrants . . . an increase of irregular movements'* (Schininá, 2017, p. 102). Since 1990s the vulnerability myth that categories refugees according to a set of vulnerability criteria led mental health and PSS interventions to focus on the perceived needs of the refugees, rather than a holistic approach that weighs their strengths and resources equally. This myth was also fed by trauma narratives. The trauma narrative has a tendency to assume that certain external adversities are traumatic to all people; therefore, everyone is psychologically traumatised after being exposed to that adversity.

This assumption homogenises a group of individuals, whose respective reactions to an adversity vary depending on various factors (Miller & Rasmussen, 2014) such as personal relations, gender, power position, circumstances and existence of hope. Therefore, the distinction between the event itself and the experience of that event plays a crucial role in opening doors to a more comprehensive and systematic way of identifying responses to adversity.

Adversity-activated developments

Etymologically, the word *'trauma'* roots to the Greek verb *teiro* that has two meanings: an injury or wound and a clean surface where scratches of past are cleared (Papadopoulos, 2007). Both connotations have important implications in identifying the possible psychological responses to adversity. While the first meaning has more negative connotations that implies a default traumatisation, the second meaning create spaces which allows people to *'re-evaluate their priorities in life, change their lifestyles and acquire new values – all in all, experiencing a substantial change and renewal in their lives'* (Papadopoulos, 2007, p. 305).

In the light of its second interpretation, there are different responses to adversity and Papadopoulos conceptualises two of them as resilience and adversity-activated development (AAD) (Papadopoulos, 2007, pp. 306–308). Resilience is the ability of retaining pre-existing characteristics of an individual, even after being exposed to adversity. Regardless of its severity, the individual keeps her/his skills, and, therefore, does not necessarily seek external support to cope with the situation. Papadopoulos categorises resilience as a response where *'a great deal of their healthy functioning remains intact and unaffected by the devastations'* (Papadopoulos, 2007, p. 308).

AAD are the developments an individual acquires as a result of being exposed to adversity. Its characteristic lies in the fact that these developments were not there prior to the adversity, but developed during and/or after it. Adversity *'pushes people to the edge of (and even over) their previous understanding and expectations'* (Papadopoulos, 2007, p. 306); therefore, the individual stretches its limits and establishes a new epistemological ground that is a new system of understanding, to regain a new sense of meaning to life. AAD will be the predominant concept throughout the analysis to capture the developments of each interviewee and will stand as a solid evidence to challenge the discourses that merely focuses on traumatisation.

METHODOLOGY

Oral history interviews as a tool in life history approach

For a long period of time, certain written sources dominated the history writing process and were universally acknowledged as the most reliable and valid sources of historiography. It was the history of the dominant group, be it men, European, heterosexual, urban and upper class. Power was writing the history; voicing the few, while silencing many others. The second quarter of the 20th century witnessed new perspectives on history and historiography. Interest in capturing the disappearing traditions of the countryside, newly emerging disciplines of labour history, the era of de-colonisation, feminist movements of the 60s, 70s and 80s and identity politics influential in the 90s, all contributed to the new formulation of history (Smith, n.d). That is the 'history from below' that aims to grasp untouched areas that official and written historiographies have traditionally neglected.

'The aspiration of producing history from below was combined with the aim of uncovering the lives of people who were *'hidden from history'* (Smith, n.d). At this point of uncovering, life history approach offers a means to address topics, experiences and feelings that are missing in the existing archives. First hand recollections of people's

unique memories, letters, diaries, archival records and oral history interviews all stand as sources to write histories.

History can also be written as life histories, or oral history interviews. The words of the interviewees, together with many others, will stand as valid sources of reality that demonstrate what was meant to be a refugee for these individuals and how they cope with the situation. It will show the uniqueness, totality and complexity of each's journey with a picture of the past and this can 'enable to understand how and when certain behaviours and attitudes may have originated or changed, in addition to information about current practices and behaviours' (White, n.d, p. 6).

Life history approach is applied in this research since the hegemonic discourse on refugees, focus merely on traumatisation of refugees with a vulnerability myth and self-narratives of refugees can stand as valid sources of reality to challenge that, now and then.

Here is a clear distinction between psychology and oral history approach. The self-narratives of individuals do not only have to be used to design a psychological specific intervention, but if consented by the interviewee, can be used as sources of reality. When compiled with many others of its kind, it also offers a means to learn from the experiences of others and use them to help improve lives and contribute to social change. Here is one area for PSS workers to explore how to use these narratives, to change the vulnerable refugee approach that could contribute positively to the wellbeing of refugees and others.

With its other limitations explained below, for this field report, there were only three oral history interviews conducted. Yet, these three narratives do inform us. Oral history is powerful when it stands as a source of truth and fact; therefore, the interviews are worth being compiled and published to reach a wider audience, instead of privately used for academia. In this field report the author will describe and analyse important elements of these three interviews, the first is the interview with Yusuf, then with Ali and the final one with Ameer. (Fictitious names are used throughout the paper for reasons of confidentiality.)

Brief description of the first interview, with Yusuf

Yusuf is a Syrian refugee man, 40 years old. He is married and has five children. He is currently residing in Hatay. Yusuf crossed the border to Turkey in 2012. He is currently unemployed. The oral history interview with Yusuf took place in June 2017, at his home and lasted for 75–80 min. Earlier acquaintance of the author with Yusuf, allowed him to be more free and open, especially while answering questions related to emotions. Although he agreed to record the interview, it was soon clear that video recording was limiting his interaction, as the camera was a stranger. At this point of realisation, the author stopped the video so that the interview could continue in a more intimate manner. The language of the interview was English. Therefore, the interview was not continuously interrupted by a third party that was exterior to the narration process.

As said, our earlier acquaintance contributed to a fruitful interaction that allowed further deepening of the narrations, which is applicable not only for the interviewee, but also for the author. As an interviewer, I felt more encouraged to ask follow-up questions, and to let Yusuf speak on a deeper level about himself and his feelings.

The venue the interview took place, also played an important role. Yusuf shared photo albums of his wedding and engagement in Syria. The friendly conversation about his life back in Syria helped to shape the questions prior to the interview. As an interviewer, I picked a photo among several albums that Yusuf emotionally shared and the interview began with a question about the meaning of this photo to him.

The analysis of the interview: totality, uniqueness, complexity of each journey, Yusuf's multiple responses to the adversity

'It was so nice we did not have any problems, but maybe [other] people don't feel this . . . Sometimes I had problems, you know life problems. I was not happy because of job stress, because I did not have time to spend with my family, and maybe I did not have a political life. I did not have any decisions, [I would] like to vote like to be part of this . . . Sometimes I was not happy I did not spend time with my family, with my father, with my mother . . . Now I discover it was very, very, very nice days. My problems at that time were very small in comparison to the problems I have now.'

Yusuf's idealisation of the past throughout the interview, signals what Papadopoulos calls *'nostalgic disorientation'* (Papadopoulos, 2002, pp. 9–41).

Looking back, Yusuf argues that his life in Syria was very nice, yet he did not realise its beauty until he could compare it with his life in Turkey. He admits that he does not remember thinking about the future in Syria, contrary to Turkey, where the near future dominates his present moments. Unpredictability of future is what distorts Yusuf's sense of normality and unsettles him: *'the mysterious thing I cannot find solution for is the future. What is next? What will happen in this area, in Syria, in Turkey? I cannot stop thinking about future'*. Domination of his present moments by the future, seemingly contradictory, leads him to take refuge in a past that is nostalgic yearning. Nostalgic disorientation is the disturbance, a sense of unreality that leads one to yearn for the past as the present moment creates existential anxiety. The idealisation of past due to the present anxiety is a response to what Yusuf had gone through.

In addition to the response that makes Yusuf take refuge in the past, self-narratives of Yusuf also signal AAD. Yusuf has formulated a new epistemological ground, a new system of meanings, in Turkey, where he adapts to the new variables in his life thanks to the developments activated by adversity. He says; *'indeed the impact of being refugee, you have to find solutions for your life, you have to find a job, you have to think about solutions, you have to think about communication with people from*

different cultures, you have to break this barrier, cultural barrier'. Yusuf describes *'the life here (Turkey) more crowded, more crazy, in Syria it was calm, usual, routine. Here [there are] a lot of changes, a lot of variables happen in your life you to be aware of'*. As Papadopoulos agrees, *'wider community and cultural contexts are not abstract terms, but matter a great deal as they are active in forming at least part of the meaning systems of each individual'* (Papadopoulos, 2007, p. 310). In this meaning system, Yusuf discovered another way of being himself within a society where *'people have to live with each other, to respect each other, to prevent any kind of war, any kind of conflict'*. His empowerment derives from the need to 'manage solutions to survive to continue this life' in Turkey where there are *'a lot of changes, a lot of variables happen in your life you to be aware of'*.

Different responses of Yusuf to adversity have been interpreted in the light of systemic frameworks of nostalgic disorientation and also in relation to wider networks of family, and the Syrian and Turkish communities. The fact that Yusuf responded differently to the same adversity demonstrated the totality, uniqueness and complexity of his journey.

Brief description of the second interview, with Ali

Ali is a Syrian refugee man, aged of 27. He is married and has two children. He crossed the border to Turkey in 2015. He is currently working as an humanitarian worker. The oral history interview with Ali took place in June 2017. During the preparation for it, special care was taken in terms of privacy and confidentiality of this interview as both the author and the interviewee had common friends that may read this essay. Ali appreciated the intended anonymity, and it allowed him to discuss the political issues that affected his everyday life, both back in Syria and in Turkey.

The interview lasted for 45 min. As well as the interview, Ali was asked to make some masks, which will not be discussed in this paper; however, he asked for one extra day to finalise them. The next day when I met him to receive the masks, we had the chance to comment on the interview and discuss both his narratives and feelings while drawing the masks. The importance of the post interview meeting, in terms of the continuation of the dynamic interlink, then became clear. During the interview, a hierarchy results from the fact that he (as the interviewee) provides me (the author) the sources and the interviewer receives the materials needed for the research. However, our discussion afterwards made clear that his agency did not come to an end when the voice recording stopped, but continues in any interaction we have in everyday life.

The analysis of the interview: formulation of new epistemological ground as exposed to adversity, prevalence of normality discourse in Ali's life story

Ali stated: *'So it was really normal life before. Then, in summer of 2012 everything changed'*.

Isinsu: *'What is changed?'*

Ali: *'My normal life changed . . . '*

Ali continues: *'So this life began and we used to, here we began house'*.

Isinsu: *'How would you describe your everyday life in Turkey?'*

Ali: *'Here? It's return to same. Normal life . . . I see a new life, in new system of life in Turkey . . . I want to live this normal life'*.

Normality is the motive of the oral history interview conducted with Ali. A pattern that defines his everyday life back in Syria and also in Turkey, requires a reading through a systemic approach. The most appropriate in this case is one that looks at onto-ecological settledness as part of an AAD (Gkinokis, 2017).

Onto-ecological settledness is a sense of patterned life that has a minimum level of cohesion, stability and consistency (Gkinokis, 2017). One is onto-ecologically settled if things around one are in the framework of one's comprehension that enables a reading of life. In the migration context, this settledness is disturbed, even destroyed if displacement had been involuntary. Meaning is lost, things are unknown. The unknown does not fall under the light of the epistemological lamp-posts, and so is beyond the normality (Bateson, 1968).

A challenge to that normality results in disorientation, yet also creates a space where a new epistemological ground could be formulated with redefined position and interrelated actions to re-orientate. This space is the means to regain a sense of normality to settle onto-ecologically.

Ali provided a comprehensive picture of his life back in Syria where he was working as a teacher. Happily living with his family, Ali describes those times as a *really normal life*. The sense of normality was gradually distorted as the 'Islamic State of Iraq and Syria' (ISIS) were becoming more powerful in his hometown. He had been asked to teach the curriculum that had been already modified, upon the request of ISIS. He had been suspected and under increased scrutiny. His epistemological ground was shaken further as he had to limit the use of his mobile phone as ISIS was increasingly monitoring communications with the outside world. The situation ended up where no one from his town could leave their houses. The ground breaking event that paralysed his sense of normality was when ISIS brought the dead bodies of 45 people and exhibited them in the street without letting anyone to bury them. At that moment, Ali decided to leave his already distorted *'really normal life'* in Syria.

A new epistemological ground was founded after he settled down in Turkey. Currently he is working and has found a nice house thanks to his helpful acquaintances. He hopes to improve his Turkish speaking skills to fully integrate with the host community. His action is different, not that of a teacher anymore, but a humanitarian worker. His positioning has changed, no more a resident of his country of citizenship living close to his extended family, but a Syrian refugee. His comprehension of the system of life has

changed drastically; a new onto-ecological settledness is established, thanks to the reformulation of epistemology, action and position. He expects to continue to *live this normal life*.

'I grow. They're growing here . . . There is no difficult for me, I can cope'.

'I, Ali am now stronger, can adopt more, better experience. That's it. Ali is better now'.

Adaptation is another prevalent theme in the interview that might link with the normality discussion. If the person is equipped enough to retain his/her resources and capacities, there could be positive developments after exposure to adversity (Papadopoulos, 2007). As Ali adapts much better now, the limits of his current epistemological ground stretch and his sense of normality has wider ground. Without underestimating its negative effects, Ali acknowledges the contribution of the displacement to his coping and integration skills which make him grow 'stronger' and 'better'.

Brief description of third interview, with Ameer

Ameer is a Syrian refugee man, 26 years old. He is not married and has no children. He is working as a translator at a pharmacy in Hatay. Despite the other two interviewees, Ameer moved to Turkey with a clear intention of returning in couple of weeks. It has been almost 3 years now that he could not return. The oral history interview with Ameer took also place in June 2017, in Hatay. It lasted for 75 min in total. His extrovert personality fruitfully contributed to the interview, during which the author minimised any interaction and allowed him to talk freely. He was asked to conduct the interview in Turkish if he felt comfortable doing so. Having a good command of the language, he agreed. This decision had advantages and disadvantages. The flow of the conversation was not interrupted by a translator; yet while questioning feelings and emotions, our common ground in Turkish was inadequate to deepen the narration. For the future studies, cultural idioms of distress and explanatory models that are specific to Syrian culture should be crucial for communication.

The analysis of the interview: internalisation of hegemonic discourse on refugees, rejection of the term refugee by Ameer

Ameer: *'I am not a citizen here, I am human, I am a refugee. That's all'*.

Isinsu: *'How does it feel to be a refugee here?'*

Ameer: *'Actually, I am not a refugee here, really, I am not'*.

Isinsu: *'What does it mean to be a refugee for you?'*

Ameer: *'To be a refugee . . . People escaped from the war, to protect them, only to protect them for their safety and security'*.

Isinsu: *'Why did you say that you are not a refugee?*

Ameer: *'Because Turkish people did not make me feel like it, like a refugee. I am like them, my colleagues at work are*

talking to me, they did not do any bad to me. As if I am a citizen, but I will not be a citizen here, it is better like this'.

What is the space left that is untouched by the hegemonic discourse? Is resistance possible? If yes, does it have any apparatuses that are not constructed by the power itself? Nandy (1983) suggests the idea of impossibility of the free existence of the subaltern within the hegemonic discourse because it is the hegemonic apparatuses which construct the other. Oral history may offer us new alternative methodologies that the marginalised can construct its counter narratives, yet it may also demonstrate the internalisation of the hegemonic discourse on the individual.

Schininà (2017) argues that migrants are traumatising us as they are the carriers of the trauma that we have been continuously tried to exclude from our onto-ecological settledness. In order not to be confronted with our traumatisation, the objectification of migrants tends to focus on its so-called vulnerabilities and narrate a story as such. A Syrian refugee residing in Turkey is also the subject to a hegemonic discourse. Negative connotations of the term refugee in Turkey trace back to objectification and abjectification of the migrants. Therefore, a *refugee* comes with a handbag of attributions; that are negative, passive, secondary and vulnerable.

As a refugee in Turkey, Ameer rejects the term since he internalises the hegemonic discourse on refugees. Ameer does not problematise the negative connotations of the term refugee, but rather rejects it, which by default, accepts the negative attributions attached to it. His successful integration to the host community, well command of the Turkish language, enable him to avoid being a refugee, as his profile does not match with an object or an abject that is vulnerable.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

What did oral history interviews conducted with Yusuf, Ali and Ameer tell us? At first, it is Yusuf, Ali and Ameer who told us the things, not any other person. This distinctive feature is important to note. It is the self-narratives of the refugees that now by reading and contextualising we are trying to understand what are the current practices and behaviours and how they may have generated.

The self-narratives of refugees, at first, demonstrate that each experience is specific and being exposed to adversity, that is the displacement due to war, affect each in an individualistic manner. Yusuf's narratives demonstrate how his responses were various and include nostalgic disorientation and AADs. Ali's response was unique in showing how he claimed back his sense of normality with the help of adaptation skills. Ameer's narratives also stands out as distinctive as he refrains from describing himself as refugee, since this word in the current discourse comes with a bag of bad connotations.

Based on the interviews, this research with small number of cases shows that life history approach can be applied to refugee studies with a particular focus on empowerment. These narratives do give us sources to see the traces of

hegemonic discourse, but also the creation of existential spaces where these narratives can counter the discourse. Refugees are powerful because they can have the capacity to regain a sense of normality and ability to cope with changing dynamics. This spectrum of responses to the displacement and refugee status stands against vulnerability focused approaches to refugees and opens up other ways to see things.

It is the author's belief that compilation of many oral history interviews and putting them at the disposal of the public, and most importantly to field staff working with refugees, may contribute to achieve empowerment even at community level. As White (n.d, p. 16) puts it *'oral history, by giving a voice to people who may be suppressed, or less often heard, allows them to tell their story. The very fact that someone is eager to hear their story can increase their sense of worth, and if this is taken with interest by the community, then this feeling is deepened'*.

Limitations of the Study

This research had its own limitations. In the context of migration, where the dynamics between the refugees and host community is a matter of power relation, and the question arises to what extent that the interviewer is from the host community affects the flow of narratives. Emphasis on good relations with Turkish community, by all interviewees, made me question my stance during the interview process. Another limitation arises from the fact that both the interviewees and the interviewer had to use a second language different from our mother-tongue. Repetition of a few questions resulted from a lack of the same command of language, and interrupted the flow. Further restriction is related to space and access. It was challenging to find an appropriate space to conduct interviews with a man alone as a female interviewer. It required reference of acquaintances that were a prerequisite to allow one-to-one interaction, without an observer nearby.

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