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**Refugee Stories in Britain: Narratives of Personal
Experiences in a Network of Power Relations**

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**Thesis submitted in requirement for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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April 2009

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DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Western society is permeated by a culture in which personal tales can be told and listened to continuously, which is intensified by different modes of hi-tech mass media production and consumption. However, some narratives seem to flow into public discourses and find receptive audiences much more easily than others.

Personal experience stories of excluded communities, when they feed into audiences that will listen to them, have the potential to bring about social change. Indeed, lifting the silence surrounding socially excluded lives is a legitimate, democratic means of achieving social and political justice. In a globalised world it is the degree to which a person has the capacity to control the story of their lives which is considered a significant means of empowerment.

Refugee narratives are mostly represented by others, mainly as part of a political strategy to control their entry into Britain, and their lives whilst their claim for asylum is being considered. A range of narratives about refugees dominates public discourses, whilst personal refugee stories remain marginalised. There is limited scope for refugees to tell their stories, and restricted access to a potential audience. As a result they lack the capacity of *agency* in constructing their own lives, and in having any impact on their political and social circumstances.

This qualitative study explores how personal refugee narratives are situated in a network of power relations. A methodological framework involving extensive fieldwork, which includes a number of in-depth life story interviews, provides the background to the study. Narrative analysis offers a profound insight into the extent to which refugees can be seen as *agents* in constructing their life stories.

The current social climate and policy environment determines how refugee narratives are represented, which is epitomised in the asylum determination procedure, where refugee stories need to meet narrow criteria in order to be deemed credible. In contrast, the recent academic and government interest in the personal dimension of refugee integration within social cohesion discourses, indicates the urgent need for a narrative space, or a platform where different communities can share experiences. In this context, thinking about refugee narratives as constructed within a structural setting as well as conceptualising them as a vehicle to integration and empowerment, is high on the policy agenda and remain key areas of interest for future academic research.

GLOSSARY

AAL	Afghan Association of London
ARC	Application Registration Card
ASU	Asylum Screening Unit
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BIA	Border and Immigration Agency
CAN	Community Advocacy Network
DL	Discretionary Leave
DP	Displaced Person
ECHR	European Convention of Human Rights
ELR	Exceptional Leave to Remain
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
EVW	European Volunteer Worker
EU	European Union
EURODAC	European Automated Fingerprinting Regulation System
GDWP	Gatwick Detainee Welfare Project
GP	General Practitioner
HP	Humanitarian Protection
ICAR	Information Centre on Asylum and Refugees
ILPA	Immigration Law Practitioners Association
ILR	Indefinite Leave to Remain

IND	Immigration and Nationality Directorate
IPPR	Institute for Public Policy Research
KLA	Kosovo Liberation Army (see also UCK)
LNHCR	League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
NAM	New Asylum Model
NAO	National Audit Office
NASS	National Asylum Support Service
PDKI	Kurdistan Democratic Party Iran
PKK	Kurdish Communist Party
RAGU	Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit
REAP	Refugee in Effective and Active Partnership
RWRP	Refugee Women Resource Project
SIS	Schengen Information System
UCK	Kosovo Liberation Army (see also KLA)
UK	United Kingdom
UKIAS	United Kingdom Immigration Advisory Service
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNRRA	United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency
USA	United States of America

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

The world and its inhabitants continue to be plagued by many violent, political, refugee-producing conflicts. Globally, the number of refugees and other populations of concern to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees remain high at a total of 31,722,710 million (UNHCR, 2008)¹. Political conflicts including violent clashes in former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Somalia tarnish memories of the 1990s, and where political instability had been paramount in Afghanistan and Iraq prior to the new millennium, the events of 9/11 in New York in 2001, the July bombings in London in 2005, as well as other threats of terrorism, resulted in Anglo-American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Subsequently, the global war on terrorism has dominated global politics since the beginning of the new millennium. Other contemporary humanitarian crises include the ongoing conflicts in Sri Lanka, Darfur, and Zimbabwe, where many people remain victims of political violence, and lack of protection by their state (UNHCR, 2008).

Although the need for a place of safety remains urgent, in recent years states have been less willing to tolerate refugees within the confines of their borders, have been less inclined to grant them any form of Leave to Remain, and have gradually eroded the rights they are entitled to under international law (Crisp, 2004). Some scholars argue that these

¹ This number reflects statistical information as of 1 January 2008, and includes refugees, asylum seekers, returned refugees, internally displaced people, stateless persons and various others of concern to the UNHCR. For an up to date overview of the global refugee situation, please see the UNHCR *Global Report 2007*, published in June 2008, on www.unhcr.org/gr07/index.html

changes in attitude are part of a wider shift in the paradigm that guides the concept and practice of asylum.

This paradigm shift is partly explained by some profound changes in the global political landscape. The end of the Cold War not only witnessed the disintegration of two dominant camps, which opened up parts of the world that had hitherto been difficult to leave or enter, it also caused populations around the globe to be plagued by political, social, and economic unpredictability and uncertainty (Schuster, 2005). Refugee producing events have taken place in many different regions, and millions of people in the Middle East, Asia, the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, and in parts of Africa have been uprooted as a result of these considerable political, economic, and social developments.

In response, Western states have moved towards an attitude of 'narrow domestic considerations'. Instead of upholding a commitment to human rights and a sense of solidarity with refugees, feelings of national interest seem more important and refugees are regarded as threatening the receiving country's 'political regime, cultural identity, socio-economic order, environment and national security' (Joly, 2002: 9). This emerging approach is also reflected in transferring the obligation to refugees from Western states to holding countries of origin responsible for refugee producing conflicts. Such an approach justifies containing people close to their homeland, in an attempt to prevent them from ever reaching the shores of receiving countries in Europe (Chimni, 1998; see also Joly, 2002).

In the current international economic and political climate it is going to be increasingly difficult for refugees to reach countries of asylum. Many thousands of people are already caught in a situation of stagnancy whilst on their journey. They are stuck in between borders, unable to move forward, or to return. Policy making in Britain, as in other EU member states, drives the overall EU approach towards refugees and other migrants. Each individual member state has managed to tighten the security of its borders, and so has Europe as a whole. The consequence of the extreme strengthening of EU borders, within Europe, and through ‘off-shore’ initiatives (Schuster, 2005), is that refugees and migrants have hardly any chance of ever entering a European country. Yet, because their hope for a better future, or a place of safety is so great, people will keep coming. As a consequence a mixture of refugees and other types of migrants is gathering in places all around the outskirts of Europe. Examples of this are to be found in Libya and Morocco (Schuster, 2005), in Istanbul (Yaghmaian, 2007), or Cairo (Moorehead, 2005).

Despite the measures of European ‘off-shore’ border control, over 25,000 ‘illegal’ migrants from the African coast arrived in the Canary Islands in 2006², from where they hoped to find a way into Europe. They made hazardous journeys in rickety boats, and many died at sea (*Guardian*, December 2006). In order to stem such illegal migration from Africa and the Middle East, Frontex, the EU’s border control agency, commits boats and aircrafts to places around Europe’s perimeter. It has deployed vessels and other

² These numbers have since decreased

immigration control paraphernalia to countries like Mauritania, Senegal, and Cape Verde (BBC, January 2007)³.

More recently European and Italian authorities have coordinated attempts with the Libyan government to prevent migrants from entering Libya across its southern border with the Sahara desert. Many people have tried to travel (or walk) across the Sahara from southern parts of Africa, in an attempt to use Libya as an interim destination from which they can try to cross the Mediterranean into Italy and other parts of Europe. European authorities firstly tried to coerce Libya to patrol its Mediterranean coastal waters, to which the Libyan government responded that if migrants could not travel on to Europe, they would remain in Libya, which at the time already hosted an estimated one million migrants. The Italian authorities, in line with EU guidelines, then decided to subsidise Libya to patrol its border with the Sahara to prevent people from entering Libya, as well as combining efforts in guarding the Mediterranean, to ensure that migrants can not cross the sea into Italy (*BBC Panorama*, 2008; *Observer*, 2008).

The gatherings of people around the outskirts of Europe are a direct consequence of tighter controls on migration, and changes in the asylum paradigm. Matthew Gibney (2001: 18) argues that where asylum policy measures and immigration control paraphernalia have moved from Western states closer to regions of origin, a legal framework needs to be developed, that keeps a close eye on the activities of ‘non-arrival measures’, and which perhaps may alleviate some of their harshest consequences:

³ BBC (2007) *Spain and Senegal in Migrant Deal* January 2007, downloaded from <http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/6...> on 6/1/07

The legality of the full range of non-arrival measures need to be scrutinized, especially in the light of the expanding sphere of human rights law; and ways of ameliorating the worst effects of these policies need to be proposed and considered. This last point is of particular importance. Non-arrival measures are not going to go away. They are an increasingly important part of the immigration control arsenal of liberal democratic states. Work needs to be done on how a legal and ethical framework might be put around these forms of activity (Gibney, 2001: 18)

Gibney (2001: 19) acknowledges however, that extending the law beyond national borders would only solve part of the problem, and that to achieve a ‘more inclusive politics of asylum’, an approach is needed that brings out ‘from the public of Western states greater identification with and respect for the claims of refugees and asylum seekers’. This approach would place greater emphasis on the inclusion of personal stories of refugees in public and policy discourses, in an attempt to generate more understanding of what motivated refugees and migrants to leave their homelands, of the difficulties they face during flight, and upon arrival in a new society.

However, until now citizens of Western states have seen refugees through ‘spectacles paradigmatically productive of statist ends and beginnings’ (Soguk, 1999: 178), and most are unaware of the realities of refugee experiences from the perspective of the refugee, and of the personal stories of refugee lives, as told by refugees themselves. Instead, as Cohen (2001: 293) suggests, ‘the massive shifting populations of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees’ have been excluded and segregated into ‘enclaves of losers and redundant populations, living in the modern version of ghettos, remote enough to be left “out of sight, out of mind”’ (ibid). Such people live in limbo, in in-between places, without documents, without rights, and without a chance of ever reaching a destination where the host population is willing to offer them support, or listen to their stories. Their

stories are ‘either not deemed relevant or credible or, increasingly not heard at all’ (Eastmond, 2007).

To the question of whether the situation might improve for displaced people, and how this improvement could be achieved, posed to Behzad Yaghmaian⁴ (2007) during his lecture *Embracing the Infidel: Muslims on the Journey West* at City University, he answered that in the near future, the situation will not improve. Instead, it will deteriorate, more people will become displaced, and they will be even less welcome in receiving countries. He urged that the only thing to do for scholars, researchers and/or journalists is to tell the stories of refugees, migrants and other displaced people, in an attempt to ‘put faces to numbers’, to remind politicians and policy makers that they are making decisions for human beings.

In this context, there is a need for the telling of the personal experience stories of refugees, to raise awareness of their situation, to engender a perception of refugee lives which is more understanding of their situation in a world which is hostile towards them. There is quite a clear political and human rationale for the telling of refugee stories, and subsequently, the main focus of this study is to explore the personal narratives of refugee lives, in an attempt to establish how and why such narratives remain ‘out of sight, out of mind’ (Cohen, 2002: 288-292), especially in a society which in recent years has opened up to enable personal experience stories generally to be told and listened to.

⁴ Behzad Yaghmaian is author of *Embracing the Infidel: Stories of Muslim Migrants on the Journey West* (2006), in which he tells the stories of Muslim migrants, whom he followed for two years during their migration in the Middle East and Europe. He was born in Iran, and currently lives in the US, where he is Professor of Political Economy at Ramapo College in New Jersey.

Aim of the Study

Since the sharing of personal refugee stories needs to compete with the discourses and narratives about refugees as represented by others, it appears that personal refugee stories are subjected to an interwoven set of power relationships, through which they remain marginalized. In a society where networks of power operate to determine which voices dominate the political agenda, have easier access to audiences willing to listen, and have more influence on the kind of language in which certain issues will be discussed, this study is interested in the personal experience stories of refugees, aims to question how such stories are situated in a framework of power relations, and aims to explore the extent to which refugees can be seen as *agents* in shaping their lives. It therefore addresses the following research issues:

- Explore the diversity of refugee experiences that constitute refugee stories, thereby considering how refugees weave their personal experiences into life stories, how they interpret and make sense of their lives.
- How do refugees interpret their experiences within a political and structural context, and how are refugee narratives constructed in relation to the claiming of asylum within the British policy framework, especially with regards to the issue of ‘credibility’ of refugee stories in the asylum determination procedure?
- How do refugees overcome barriers to settlement, and manage to make new lives?

- Examine individual refugee stories against the background of a hostile social climate towards them; how and why are refugee stories seldom told and do not find an audience willing to listen?
- Investigate whether refugees can be seen as *agents* in constructing their life stories, by focusing on the extent to which they have the freedom to shape their lives within a network of power relations.
- Analyse how refugee stories are subjected to a network of power relations.

Sharing Individual Stories in a Globalised World

In contemporary society one can enter any bookshop and find a section of the shop dedicated to ‘auto/biographies’. Here we find books about the lives of sports personalities, politicians, actors, singers, chefs, tv presenters, and other ‘celebrities’ of grander or lesser stature. Some of these *life stories* sell very well, whilst others evoke less interest. Furthermore, in the last eight years or so, with the emergence of ‘reality television programmes’, we can all indulge and be spectators to some, or all, aspects of people’s private lives. Programmes range from *Big Brother* to *the X Factor*, where young hopefuls sing their heart out, and support their efforts with personal stories of suffering bereavement, foster care, or teenage single parenthood. It seems evident that ‘the logic of the confession reifies the concept of self and turns it into a cultural commodity’ (Denzin: 1992: 8-9).

The phenomenon of making a show of your personal life does not have to be this extreme. There are many examples of people sharing their experiences for reasons other

than being self-obsessed. It may be to either find or give support, many websites or weblogs for example, are dedicated to sharing experiences of how people cope with issues such as living with autism, suffering cancer, being a teenage mother, or coping with disability⁵. The continuous telling of and listening to stories of personal experiences indicates the need for people to share their tales, as well as an eagerness amongst the public to bear witness to individual, private lives. It is therefore possible to argue that in contemporary Western society a culture of mass media production, hi-tech media, 24 hour broadcasting, and the publishing of ever more weeklies, has created an environment in which personal tales can be told and listened to.

This *storytelling society* reflects the ‘narrative turn’ (Rustin, 2000)⁶ in a postmodern world, which is characterised by a globalised economy and international systems of communication. Issues such as the threat of terrorism, challenges to the nation-state, and increasingly violent political confrontations in many regions around the globe penetrate deeply into social worlds and individual lives. This is a world in which common goods, personal experiences and social relationships have become commodities, and the changing dynamics of the family, employment structures, sexuality, leisure time, as well as belonging to a nation-state have become increasingly problematic. In order to keep up with such rapid changes, individuals need to make sense of their experiences through a continuous cycle of telling and listening to stories (Denzin, 2001: 154-155). There are stories galore in this ‘narrative turn’, a cacophony of voices are demanding attention, yet

⁵ Please visit www.info.cancerresearchuk.org, www.macmillan.org.uk/cancertalk/real-life-experiences/, or www.ruthinking.co.uk/for-girls/abortion.aspx, for examples of this

⁶ see also for example: Hinchman and Hinchman (1997) *Memory, Identity, Community: the idea of narrative in the Human Sciences*

even though many refugees have claimed asylum in Britain, and many stories are told *about* them, the stories of their personal experiences are seldom told and rarely heard. This study aims to question how and why there is a silence surrounding the personal stories of refugee lives.

Individualisation and Modernity

The notion of the individual, or an individual life did not emerge until modernity. In pre-modern, traditional societies individual lives were mostly shaped by social narratives, or ‘myths’ in oral or written form, which were an integral part of the social fabric and figured as ‘social scripts, which most individuals were expected to follow’ (Rustin, 2000: 33). Such myths did not describe the individual as a separate entity, but as woven into the family, attached to a place, and as living within a hierarchical social order and according to rigid religious codes, which meant that although individual identities were more secure and unchanging, they also remained largely unchallenged (Plummer, 2000: 79-85).

Although the idea of the individual is a predominantly modern phenomenon, human life has involved the sharing of experiences throughout history. Telling stories of lives can be traced as far back as when ancient cultures used oral traditions to pass on their historic tales. Written stories began to emerge as early as the Stone Age, when people made drawings on the walls of caves to give expression to their lives, and in ancient Egypt, circa 3000BC, hieroglyphics were used in tombs and catacombs to describe the lives of Pharaohs (Plummer, 2000: 79-85).

It was from the beginning of the Industrial Revolution during the second half of the sixteenth century that in Europe an interest in the ‘individual subject’ developed. The

interest in the ‘self’ was demonstrated through a heightened awareness of the differences between individuals, as well as an interest in ‘their imputed psychological depth, their moral value, and their capacity for change and development’ (Rustin 2000: 34). People also began to develop an understanding of themselves as individuals, they started to look inwards, and became aware of themselves as a being of value and significance. The focus of the individual’s gaze moved towards their ‘inner nature’, and people began to ‘retreat from the public life into the realms of privacy’ and the notion of ‘the inner thought, the private home, the real self’ emerged as an essential part of human life (Plummer, 2000: 81; see also Giddens, 1991).

It is important to note that the notion of the ‘individual’ is a predominantly Western concept. Many other cultures hold a much more collective view of human life. For example, Stephen Biko, in his struggle against the apartheid regime in South Africa, argued for a return to *Africanism*, which he explained as a way of being African or black, as defined by Africans themselves. He situates Africanism directly opposite the individualism, competitiveness, and instrumental rationality of Western culture, and advocates values such as *man-centredness*, which emphasises collectivism, friendship, and group solidarity, and he claims:

One of the most fundamental aspects of our culture (African or black) is the importance we attach to man. *Ours has always been a man-centred society.* Westerners have on many occasions been surprised at the capacity we have for talking to each other – not for the sake of arriving at particular conclusions but merely to enjoy the communication for its own sake. Intimacy is a term not exclusive for particular friends but applying to a whole group of people.....These things are never done in the Westerner’s culture.....all our action is usually joint-community-oriented action rather than the individualism which is the hallmark of the capitalist approach (Biko, in Howarth, 1997: 62, original emphasis).

The first 'document of life' that took the 'autobiographical' form of confessing sins in order to seek forgiveness, was probably Saint Augustine's *Confessions* (circa AD 400) (Plummer, 2000: 85). Although this was considered the first life story that searched the inner soul, it was not until the emergence of Enlightenment philosophy that writing stories of individual lives, both by the self, and by others, became significant. Enlightenment philosophy advocated the individual 'as an actor independent of family or positioned' (Miller, 2000: 1-10), and enabled different strands of circumstances to materialise, which established a continued interest in individual lives.

Firstly, in philosophy epistemological debates centred on whether vision, arriving at knowledge through the use of a person's senses, or reason should be the basis of scientific knowledge (Rustin, 2000: 34; Woodiwiss, 2001; 2005). Secondly, the Protestant church encouraged individuals to seek redemption through exploring the inner self. Thirdly, the availability of books and documents in print enabled a much larger proportion of the population to have access to texts, and the subsequent appearance of the literary novel enabled readers to think about, and give meaning to their lives in relation to the world around them. Finally, around the turn to the twentieth century, the portrayal of individual lives on film enabled the cinema to become a dominant medium in universalising the idea of an individual identity, most notably through its creation of 'the star' (Rustin, 2000: 35).

The arrival of modernity instigated some profound changes to the structure of society, and to how individual identities were constructed. The move from a religious to a scientific worldview, industrialisation and urbanisation, and the emergence of a capitalist

economy, all contributed to a new social order, which gave rise to the modern notions of freedom of the individual and democratisation of the masses (Plummer, 2000: 82-3). Enlightenment discourses of the self, the subject, portrayed the individual as the rational agent, as occupying the 'ground of action', which included the idea of a 'true self'. Stuart Hall argues that this 'logic of identity' has disappeared. The discourse of 'inside and outside, of the self and the other, [and] of the individual and society' has been destabilized by some essential developments in modern thought. Firstly, Marx suggested that man makes history, but not under conditions of their own choosing. Instead, individual lives are constructed by class conflict in a capitalist mode of production (Hall, 2000: 145). From a modern perspective, individual freedom and democracy was to be achieved through emancipatory politics. Human life was to be freed from traditional and religious doctrines and prejudices through the use of rationality and reason. Emancipatory politics attempted to achieve equality and social justice. This focused on diminishing and eradicating exploitation, inequality, oppression and injustice, which for Marx would occur through the mobilization of the working classes, since 'class was the agency of emancipation as well as the driving force of history'. For non-Marxists, emancipatory politics was to improve the situation of marginalized and excluded social groups (Giddens, 1991).

Other challenges to the individual as a rational actor were the emergence of the psycho-analytic approach to understanding people, through which Freud pioneered the notion of the 'unconscious'. The 'unconscious' determines individual behaviour from within, and 'makes the self begin to seem like a pretty fragile thing'. In structuralist theory, thinkers such as Ferdinand Saussure argued that instead of people making their lives through the

use of language, language structures determine the way people live, '[T]he tale tells the teller, the myth tells the myth-maker' (Hall, 2000: 145-6). Hall marks these challenges to the notion of the modern subject as the 'beginning of modernity as trouble, not as enlightenment and progress, but as a problem' (ibid: 146). Further changes involve the feminist critique of modern society as a patriarchal society and oppressive to women, as well as the importance of other cultures in questioning the 'Western episteme'. These changes have destabilized the unified collective social identities, which related to class, gender, race and 'the West', and which provided the foundations within which to situate the individual self. This fragmentation to collective social narratives has happened at the same time as other modern projects, such as the nation-state, national identity, and national economies, have come under threat (Hall, 2000: 146).

Fragmented Selves and Stories

It is possible to argue that modern society as characterised by a capitalist economy of mass production, reasonably steady employment and state sponsored welfare systems, as well as political systems which were comprised of a set of institutions centred on the ethnically homogenous nation-state, has all but disappeared. Instead, the shift to a post industrial and service based economy, the decline of traditional skills and long-term employment, radical changes to community structures, and the consequences of changing social perceptions and values have had an enormous social, political and cultural impact. They have led to dramatic changes in employment structures, the breakdown of class and class-based politics, the rise of individualism, as well as widening divisions between an increasingly affluent and 'lifestyle' orientated secure workforce and a more fragmented, excluded population (Allen and Cars, 2001; Forrest and Kearns, 2001; Seeraj, 2003).

Some theorists of individualisation, such as Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992), argue that the heightened individualisation inherent in postmodern or late modern life, is giving a 'new importance to individuals' (Rustin, 2000: 33), and enables more scope for 'reflexivity'. They explain reflexivity as the capacity to rationally reflect on, and make decisions about life style choices, which is 'more possible and necessary for the social actor as social structures and boundaries become weaker', and is an essential feature in this 'climate of change, both for individuals and for social institutions' (Rustin and Chamberlayne, 2000: 5 – 6).

In this context, the weakening of social structures gives more opportunity as well as responsibility to the individual to shape their own identities and create their own lifestyles, whilst at the same time, individuals are bombarded with a wealth of narratives, which contain (sometimes conflicting) information of how to live their lives, and encourage individuals to 'construct an authentic version of themselves, making use of the numerous identity-props which consumer society makes available' (Rustin, 2000: 33). In this context, Plummer (1995) argues, the 'highly individuated, self-conscious and unstable identity' is replacing the 'old, stable, unitary self of traditional communities', and it is the rapid changes in late modern life that shape these 'new selves'. It is the continuous need for understanding the self in this whirlwind of change that gives rise to the continuous flow of telling stories of the 'modern human being'.

Theorists such as Giddens (1991) view the new current of individualisation as exemplifying new opportunities of emancipation, and they welcome this new world of freedom and opportunities, where 'reflexivity' – 'the possibility to understand and choose

the circumstances and rules of one's life' (Rustin, 2000: 33) is seen as the attainment of individual liberation. For Giddens (1991) 'life politics is the politics of a reflexively mobilised order', which reflects the project of 'self-actualisation', made possible by the shifting boundaries of global societies:

Life politics concerns political issues which flow from processes of self-actualisation in post-traditional contexts, where globalizing influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely where processes of self-realisation influence global strategies (ibid, 1991).

Through reflexivity individuals have the capacity to make 'life decisions', and engage in life politics, by which Giddens means the ability to shape an identity of the self according to the rapidly changing social circumstances. Life politics involves making 'life decisions' about shaping an identity of the self by interpreting the experiences of changing society. One needs to link such experiences to future ventures in an attempt to construct a coherent life, and interpret the life course 'as a unity against the backdrop of shifting social events' (Giddens, 1991).

Other perspectives paint a more cynical picture of what these changes mean to individual lives, and include the Foucauldian notion that individual lives are constructed through political, scientific and social discourses, which are as dominant in determining people's life styles as the collective identities of the modern era (Foucault, 2003; 1980; Rabinow, 1984; Smart, 2002). Furthermore, for many social commentators, globalization is not necessarily beneficial to individuals, since making decisions about 'commodities and the identities packaged with them', is not determined by the capacity to individual agency, but according to the whims of a post industrial capitalist market, where such choices remain superficial (Rustin, 2000: 33). The notion of universalism in combination with a

relatively secure employment paradigm that characterised the post war era, has given way to an uneven distribution of the costs and benefits of social and economic change. The values of social justice, human rights, and citizenship are increasingly threatened as a result of economic restructuring and the dismantling of public welfare, as well as by fragmentation, insecurity and competition. The reality of the so called 'free market' is of increasing numbers of people in poverty, of social division and exclusion (Seeraj: 2003; Kennedy, 2000; Craig, 1998)⁷. For the majority of people individualization means a situation of more anxiety and higher levels of insecurity, as a result of a 'transfer of economic risk of the owners of capital to those without such advantages', and many people might desire more secure life styles (Rustin, 2000: 33).

Other critiques include the idea that the concepts of 'reflexivity' and 'individualisation' exaggerate the erosion of social structures as a result of globalization. Firstly, globalizing processes have given rise to new forms of 'invisible structures', which continue to shape lives. In addition, research demonstrates that individuals have not become 'disembedded from social and cultural settings', but rather individuals have continued to live their lives quite closely situated within their social networks. In fact, 'reflexivity' is not an individual activity, but a process which 'depends on the emphatic sharing of experience' (Rustin and Chamberlayne, 2000: 7-8). In terms of political activity, Rustin and Chamberlayne (2000: 7-8) argue that as societies have become more fragmented and individualized, new forms of solidarity need to be developed. However, this does not mean that the notion of social solidarity has altogether disappeared, and they claim:

⁷ For a detailed discussion on the effects of globalization on social exclusion, see Seeraj, M. (2003) *Social Exclusion: Urban Regeneration and Black and Minority Ethnic Communities* Unpublished Thesis London: South Bank University

The 'fully individualised' person is fully excluded from sources of support, solidarity, and social action, entirely on his or her own, fighting the Hobbesian war of all against all. This is a warning image of de-socialised individualization (ibid).

Bauman sees much of these concerns as relating to the 'rising difficulties in translating private problems into public issues', and the problem of solidifying and concentrating predominantly individual experiences into 'public interests that are larger than the sum of their individual ingredients', and considers as a solution the re-organising of individual life politics into a more collective notion of what constitutes a 'just society' (2000: 51-52). The political danger of the narrative turn is that increasing flows of stories have stripped 'the public sphere of all substance except as the site where private worries are confessed and put on public display' (Bauman, 2000: 51-52). As argued earlier, although stories can now be told and listened to, the notion of the individual self has been reified, and become a cultural commodity (Denzin: 1992: 8-9). Bauman continues to claim that emancipatory politics has lost much of its capacity for instigating social and political change, and it seems as if '[I]t is now the public sphere which badly needs defense against the invading private – though paradoxically, in order to enhance, not cut down individual liberty' (Bauman, 2000: 51-52).

In other words, a range of different personal stories is currently being told in the public sphere, and there are many different kinds of voices vying for attention. Bauman explains this as the public domain being invaded by the private, which means that it is increasingly difficult for individual stories to be heard. Private voices are competing with one another for an audience. Where some of these voices will have been commodified and seem quite trivial, others perhaps are more in need of being heard. In this context, although personal

refugee stories have the potential to serve as a vehicle to empowerment, and to gaining a political voice, they need to compete with all the other voices, and it seems more and more complex to seek some form of emancipation or empowerment by making individual experiences public.

Since the sharing of personal refugee stories needs to compete with many other narratives and discursive forces, it appears that they are subjected to an interwoven set of power relationships, in which social practices such as ‘domination, hierarchy, marginalisation and inequality’ operate to determine which voices will ‘claim to dominate, ...top the hierarchy, ...claim the centre, and ...possess the resources’ (Plummer, 1995: 28). Plummer continues to state that ‘storytelling flows in the stream of power’, by which he means that since more powerful voices have easier access to audiences willing to listen, are more capable of controlling which issues will be on the political agenda, and have more influence on the kind of language in which certain issues will be discussed, the question of how personal refugee stories are situated in this ‘wider framework of power’ becomes inevitable (ibid: 30), and is crucial to this study.

Refugee Narratives in a Framework of Power Relations

Whilst on the one hand there are severe difficulties in seeking acknowledgement through the telling of personal stories, on the other hand, when stories of personal experiences become public, they can be intensely powerful in the impact they have on society. For example, during last year’s Celebrity Big Brother, when Jade Goody made some racist remarks, it caused a public outcry both nationally and internationally, and the Prime Minister Gordon Brown had to make a public statement condemning the racism displayed

towards Shilpa Sheti during his formal visit in Pakistan. It is but one example of how the public exhibition of individual behaviour has the potential to affect society at political, social, cultural and international level⁸.

The social impact of publicising personal experiences can be enormous. When the personal tales of a previously marginalised group become public and find an audience, they have the potential to challenge existing norms, or dominant political narratives. Plummer (1995) argues that through making their personal experiences public, members of a socially excluded group may create the opportunity to raise awareness, challenge legislation, or exercise their political voice and individuals have the potential to become personally and politically empowered through the telling of their life stories. An appropriate example is to be found in how the parents of Stephen Lawrence publicised their personal experiences about the way the London Metropolitan Police mishandled the murder of their son because he was black. Initially nobody wanted to listen to their stories, but they kept telling them, and telling them, until it became a campaign. It took quite a number of years, but the term ‘institutional racism’ came to be a widely accepted concept, which has permeated all political and policy discourses surrounding police matters.

The Political Use of Stories

It is therefore not surprising that politicians are extremely aware of the power of personal stories, especially the severe experience stories of refugee lives. When Tony Blair needed public support whilst invading Serbia during the time of the Kosovo crisis, he had no

⁸ Guardian, 20 January 2007

qualms in using atrocity stories told by Kosovan refugees in order to generate this support, even though his government had largely been unsympathetic towards refugees and asylum seekers in the years they had been in government, and was about to produce a series of very restrictive asylum and immigration legislation. During the invasion in 1999, he gave a speech to the Newspaper Society Annual Lunch, in which he made some interesting comments concerning refugee stories. He claimed that during the Kosovo crisis, and the subsequent Anglo-American attacks on Serbia, there had been ‘some powerful reporting on the refugees’, which had ‘helped our public understanding why we are engaged in the way that we are’. However, he also told his audience that on his last visit to Macedonia, a news reporter had told him that back in Britain ‘refugee fatigue’ had appeared, because the refugee stories had become ‘repetitive’.

Blair continued his speech declaring that because Kosovo was closed to the media, the refugees were the ‘prime source’ of information about what was happening, it was therefore crucial not to give in to ‘refugee fatigue’. He emphasized that the *refugee story* describes ‘real places, real people’ and ‘is a story that has to be told, day after day’, and needed to be published. Blair claimed that ‘provided the full story of the conflict continues to be told I have no doubt that because of their basic decency, and their basic common sense, the British people will maintain their support for what we are doing until the job is done’ (Blair, 1999). Underlying his plea for the reporting of refugee stories is the need for the British media to keep telling the refugees’ stories because he needed public support for the British/US invasion in Serbia.

In some political situations, government leaders are so concerned about the potential effect of personal refugee stories that they will deliberately prevent them from becoming public knowledge. For example, when the captain of the Norwegian freighter the Tampa tried to bring 434 Afghan refugees, who he rescued from their sinking boat in the Indian Ocean, into Australia in August 2001 (*The Independent*, January 2002), the then Prime Minister John Howard refused to allow entry to the refugees, who were instead taken to Nauru, from where they made their claims for asylum (Maley, 2002). Whilst the Tampa was waiting near Christmas Island, it was government strategy to keep journalists away from the ship, because the authorities did not want personal experience stories from the Afghan refugees to become public knowledge, in case they might raise sympathy and support amongst the public (Goodnow, 2007).

In the following year, 200 Afghan refugees were on hunger strike, accompanied by desperate acts such as sowing their lips together, self mutilation, and attempting suicide, in an attempt to draw attention to the extremely harsh conditions in Woomera, one of Australia's most notorious detention centers. Their protests were condemned by politicians as 'attempts to blackmail immigration officials'. And again, authorities ensured that a minimal amount of information became public knowledge by only allowing a limited number of lawyers and church groups in, and denying access to the media, except for 'stage-managed' visits, during which journalists were not allowed to talk to detainees. When the chairman of Suicide Prevention Australia visited Woomera at the time, he claimed that people were introduced to him by number, not by name, to the effect of complete de-humanisation of the refugees being held. This 'veil of secrecy' made the public dependent on the 'government's version of events', and enabled the

government to have almost complete control in manipulating public understanding of the asylum issue (*the Independent*, January 2002).

In both these situations, it was Australian government policy to keep personal refugee stories deliberately out of the public's audio/visual range, to ensure that the public mind could be filled with the extremely negative images that were dominating political discourses at the time, which reveals the Australian government's concern that when personal experiences of a marginalised group become public, they have the potential to generate support, creating interpretive communities where they find an audience, and instigate social and political change. In this way, Plummer (1995) believes that the telling of one's story may lead to both personal and political empowerment. In his 'sociology of stories' he uses sexual stories to support his argument. For example, some women who have told their *rape* stories, found their lives became empowered, because the telling of their stories enabled them to develop a self image as an 'active survivor' instead of a rape victim. The telling of rape stories also changed '*situations*' (original emphasis), by creating spaces where such experiences could be shared, and have influenced police work and legal practices in relation to rape. Finally, rape stories have confronted old ways of understanding sexuality, and created a heightened awareness within wider society (ibid: 27).

In this context, in a changing, globalised world it is the extent to which a person has the capacity to control the story of their lives and how it is heard, which has come to be seen as 'a major mode of empowerment' (Plummer, 1995: 144-145), and the sharing of personal experiences within the public domain has the potential to have an incredible

impact. When such stories find an audience, and feed into communities that will listen to them, they open up spaces where their voices may be heard, thereby influencing public perception. Enabling individual narratives of marginal groups to be told, and breaking the silence surrounding socially excluded lives is part of the political process in a Western democracy, and a legitimate means of achieving social and political justice (O'Neill and Harindranath, 2006).

Spaces Opening Up

Although asylum discourses have been extremely successful in marginalising personal refugee stories, some spaces where such stories can be told are opening up in the public domain. On occasion broadsheets such as *the Guardian* will dedicate a whole section of their paper to the topic of asylum. For example, *Guardian* writers reported on what asylum seekers can expect if they make it to Britain, which contained a series of reports demonstrating the difficulties and hardship asylum seekers face once they arrive in this country (*Guardian*, 23 May 2001). Or personal accounts may be used to challenge the way that refugees have been 'demonised' throughout history (*Independent*, 23 May 2003). On occasion a personal account may directly be used to show the contribution that refugees make, such as the story of Elton Gashi, who left Kosovo because his parents helped the KLA. His house was burned down, and his parents presumably killed. Elton came to Britain as an unaccompanied minor by himself, and is training to become a successful professional boxer, whilst also pursuing a judicial review against the Home Secretary. In his interview with Anna Chapman for the Observer Magazine he stated 'I am finished if I go back to Yugoslavia. My parents disappeared and I don't know what will happen to me' (2 Feb 2003).

Similarly, an interest in showing a different side to what is normally exposed in the popular press about the lives of refugees is growing in the world of film making. The film *In this World (Jamal, a refugee's story)* made by Michael Winterbottom, depicts the journey of two young Afghan refugees, who made the journey to Britain in order to claim asylum, and Khaled Hosseini's (2003) *The Kite Runner* became a best selling novel, and was made into a blockbuster movie in 2007. The novel was followed by *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (Hosseini, 2007), which also became a bestseller, and in which the author makes a plea for the plight of refugees in the postscript.

Furthermore, in recent years there have been ongoing projects demonstrating the personal experiences of refugees such as *Belonging: voices of refugees* at the Museum of London, an exhibition which challenged many assumptions made about refugees, and also explored the many contributions they make to British society, and of which the stories are still accessible online⁹. The Museum in Docklands hosted the *Museums and Refugees – Keeping Cultures* conference in March 2008, an international conference which explored how the heritage sector engages with refugees and asylum seekers and how museums can respond to the increased focus on global population movements¹⁰. In addition, organisations such as ICAR, the Refugee Council, and UNHCR dedicate a specific section of their website to individual refugee lives¹¹.

Whilst the spaces where these voices can be heard, such as in the voluntary and the heritage sector need to be applauded, as yet they remain marginal, and not powerful

⁹ Exhibition was open from 26 October 2006 to 25 February 2007, and the stories are still accessible on www.museumoflondon.org.uk/English/EventsExhibitions/Community/Belonging/PStories

¹⁰ For further details, please see:

www.museumindocklands.org.uk/English/EventsExhibitions/Events/RefugeeMuseums.htm

¹¹ See for example the 'real lives' section on the ICAR website: www.icar.org.uk/?lid=4863

enough to challenge the dominant, mainstream public image. In the meantime, although some sections of the mass media portray a much more positive image of refugees and asylum seekers, rightwing tabloids reach a much wider audience than the more challenging broadsheets. *The Sun*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Star* together sell on average 7,502,504 copies a day, whilst *the Guardian* and *the Independent* combined sell about 630,240 copies. In terms of targeting a wider audience for challenges to major national discourses, the broadsheets, however supportive, remain marginalised (Greenslade, 2005: 6).

Refugees and Agency

Although refugee stories, and hence refugee lives are subjected to an extremely restrictive framework of power relations, many scholars, researchers and field workers argue that they have not lost their sense of agency, or their capacity to act and shape their own lives. One powerful image is that of the refugee as ‘helpless victim’, which is what John Nassari (2007) calls a ‘master narrative’ of refugees in ‘amputee mode’, by which he means a situation where refugees are depicted as dependent and vulnerable, and as lacking any kind of capacity to maintain or re-build a life.

Thinking of refugees as ‘passive, needy victims’, is part of the wider framework of representing a ‘common refugee experience’ (Turton, 2003: 7). It contains images of refugees as helpless victims, who need to rely on ‘agents of compassion to keep them alive’ (Harrell-Bond, 1999:147; see also Ghorashi, 2005:185). One of the dangers of categorising refugee experiences is that ‘by emphasising the common experience and common needs of forced migrants, we risk seeing them as a homogeneous mass of needy

and passive victims' (Turton, 2003: 7), and it becomes almost inevitable that refugees come to be seen as a burden on society:

Refugees in this sense become a category of people who are dependent on governments and organisations, and who are thus a burden on their host societies (Ghorashi, 2005:185).

Although it is important to realise that refugees are often victims of violence, this does not imply that they will be helpless in all other areas of their lives, and it does not justify the image of the 'helpless refugee'. Furthermore, the idea of migration as 'forced' overlooks the idea that refugees may have had some 'choice' in the course of events, may have made some decisions in the process of becoming a refugee. Overlooking the refugees' ability to make choices and decisions, however limited, carries the assumption that refugees cannot possibly be agents (Turton, 2003: 7)¹². Therefore, Soguk (1999: 4-5) suggests refugees ought to be studied from a theoretical and methodological perspective which:

[T]akes seriously the powers and resourcefulness of these people to remake their lives; looks at the capacity of refugees to affect the contours and the quality of their lives even in displacement; their capacity for agency against all odds in turn manifests new possibilities of living found in the interstices of dramatic changes... (Soguk, 1999: 4-5).

The question of whether we should think of refugees as 'helpless victims' or 'capable agents' is a debate that will return throughout this thesis. It is an important debate, because considering refugees as agents also takes into account their creativity and inventiveness in re-making their lives, in rewriting their life stories, and coping with the new struggles that day-to-day life brings in the turmoil that is displacement.

¹² For a more detailed discussion of this debate, please see chapter five.

Chapter Overview

This thesis is organised into eight chapters, including the introduction and conclusion. The first four chapters broadly review literature relevant to narrative theory and methodology, the politics and policies of asylum and immigration, and social theories on how specific groups come to be marginalised. Chapter two is the methods chapter, and as such it will provide an epistemological rationale, and the overall aim of the study, thereby clearly outlining the research questions that this study will address. It will offer an in-depth explanation of the narrative theoretical and methodological framework within which this study is situated, as well as give a comprehensive overview of the fieldwork phase of this study, including the conducting of life story interviews with individual refugees, and semi-structured interviews with refugee workers. This chapter will conclude by describing the analytical approach that governed the analysis of the life story interviews.

In the first part of chapter three, I explain how theoretical and historical conceptions of the state, citizenship and asylum have evolved into the legislative and policy framework that governs asylum today. The final section of this chapter will offer an account of how a restrictive policy framework sets specific criteria to determine which personal refugee narratives will be accepted as ‘credible’ stories. The lives of asylum claimants need to be narrated in a very specific format in order to fit these criteria, and be deemed deserving of Refugee Status or any other form of Leave to Remain.

Chapter four investigates the network of power relations that shape the sharing of personal refugee stories in the public domain. It will unravel some of the social and

political narratives through which refugee lives are lived and told, including the narrative of Britain as a 'safe haven', the narrative of the 'other', the narrative of the 'economic migrant', and narratives of 'integration and social cohesion'. This chapter will question how this complexity of dominant narratives influences the public mind in Britain into an audience unreceptive to personal refugee stories in a variety of ways.

The main focus of following three chapters concentrates on presenting the findings of this study. Chapter five presents an analysis of the refugee stories contributed to this study as narratives that constitute a diverse range of experiences, thereby challenging the perception of refugee lives as a standardized situation. Furthermore, in considering refugees as 'capable agents', the analysis will offer an insight into how refugees were actively involved in making sense of their lives within the situation in their home countries, and how their circumstances led them to make the decision to flee.

The discussion of the findings continues in chapter six, where the focus is on the trajectory of the personal refugee story within the asylum seeking process. Asylum claims are considered on the basis of the individual circumstances of each case, and the telling of, and listening to the life story of the refugee is of vital importance during the asylum determination procedure. This chapter investigates three refugee narratives as they were processed through the asylum seeking procedure, and it will examine how difficult it is for refugees to match their subjective life experiences to the objective parameters of asylum policy, especially in relation to the issue of 'credibility'.

Where chapter six firmly demonstrates how refugee stories are restricted and constructed within the process of claiming asylum, chapter seven presents an analysis of how new

arrivals, despite a range of structural, political, social and cultural barriers, manage to share their experiences, overcome barriers to settlement and find imaginative ways in making new lives. This chapter grapples with the notion that the sharing of personal stories has the potential to be empowering, both to the individual, and in a wider social/political context.

In the final chapter I bring together the different strands of the network of power relations that run through the thesis. The concluding discussion will consider how and why refugee stories do not find an audience willing to listen, focus on the extent to which we can think of refugees as *agents* in constructing their life stories, and finalize the analysis of how refugee stories are subjected to a network of power relations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has attempted to explain how refugee stories are situated in a network of power relations in different ways. Firstly, the use of atrocity stories by Tony Blair, in order to raise public support for invading Serbia demonstrates quite clearly that politicians will use the ‘genuineness’ of refugee stories to justify their actions if it suits them. Secondly, the examples of the treatment of refugees in Australia show how authorities will deliberately keep personal voices out of the public sphere, because they are worried they will not have public support for their inhumane actions towards refugees. In Britain, despite extremely negative discourses having dominated public debates for decades, some spaces, albeit marginal, are opening up. Examples of this are to be found in the heritage sector, and through literature and film. Finally, refugees can be conceived of as having some degree of ‘agency’, and capacity in making decisions in

their lives. This relates quite closely to the question of whether their sense of ‘agency’, will lead to the sharing of their experiences in an attempt to find support and solidarity.

In a society that has witnessed a *narrative turn*, which has created a space where stories can be told and listened to (Denzin, 2001: 154-155), it is conceivable that when the stories of marginalised communities find an audience, and feed into communities that will listen to them, they have the potential to open up spaces where their voices may be heard, raise awareness and arouse public support, thereby challenging existing norms, or dominant political narratives. In this way, Plummer (1995) believes that the telling of one’s story may lead to both personal and political empowerment, which relates closely to the notion of ‘individualisation’ in a globalised world, and offers new chances of emancipation and individual freedom, to be achieved through ‘reflexivity’ and ‘life politics’ (Giddens, 1991). If we conceive of refugees as ‘capable agents’, it is also conceivable that there is the potential to both personal and political empowerment for them if their stories find an audience.

However, others have noted that a variety of individual voices is at present being heard in the public sphere, struggling to find someone willing to listen. Many of these stories, as Denzin (1992) has suggested, are the product of reification and cultural commodification. The personal experiences of the refugee may have to compete with programmes such as Big Brother, or other reality TV shows, as well as with a range of biographical publications by ‘celebrities’ of more or less grand importance. Bauman (2000) therefore argues that the public domain is being invaded by the private, which means that it is increasingly difficult for individual stories to be heard. Private voices are competing with

one another for an audience, and it seems increasingly difficult to seek some form of emancipation or empowerment by making individual experiences public.

In conclusion, in a globalised world it seems that the capacity to tell the story of one's life to an audience willing to listen, is a key factor by which we can evaluate the extent to which one is in control of their own life. For refugees in Britain this seems difficult, because political and public discourses mediate refugee images through a state-centred perspective and continue to portray refugees as the threatening 'other'. Furthermore, a changing paradigm of asylum, involving a highly increased control of borders, the erosion of rights in countries of asylum, as well as amplified levels of public hostility towards refugees and other migrants, has managed to severely curtail the individual lives of refugees. As a consequence, society continues to be impermeable for refugee stories, the British public remains oblivious to refugee experiences from the perspective of the refugee, and the personal stories that refugees can tell remain marginalised. This raises the question of how refugees, despite being in a situation of complete turmoil, manage to tell their stories, make sense of their situation, succeed in building new lives, and develop new forms of solidarity.

Chapter Two

LIFE STORY RESEARCH WITH REFUGEES: THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The uncertainties and insecurities that are inherent in a postmodern, globalised world, are reflected in the increased numbers of both refugees and other types of migrants. Modris Ekstein (1999), a Canadian historian of Latvian origin, in his book *Walking since Daybreak*, claims that refugee lives are right at the core of a rapidly changing global world, and that to understand contemporary societies, we have to listen to the voices of those that live right at the heart of these changes. In the extract below, Ekstein captures the complexity of events in refugee lives:

But how does one tell a tale that ends before it begins, that swirls in centrifugal eddies of malice, where the margin is by definition the middle, the victim the agent, where the loser stands front and centre.....If the tale is to be told, it must be told from the border, which is the new centre. It must be told from the perspective of those who survived, resurrecting those who died. It must evoke the journey of us all into exile, to reach eventually those borders that have become our common home, the postmodern, multicultural, posthistorical mainstream (Ekstein, 1999: xxi).

In order to make sense of a rapidly changing world, narratives of such changes need to be told from the border, by those that live on the fringes of society. However, the recent changes in political and social attitudes towards refugees, as well as shifts in national and international asylum and migration policies, have increasingly separated them from mainstream society. In many countries in the South refugees are held in refugee camps, and in receiving countries in the North, they are increasingly accommodated in reception

and/or detention centres, where they ‘are even more subject to *silencing*’ (Harrell-Bond and Voutira, 2007). As a result refugees are much more ‘invisible’ to members of the host society, and for researchers (as well as for journalists) it is more difficult to have access to refugees. Therefore, ‘now more than ever it is the duty of the researcher to speak on behalf of refugees’, in an attempt to capture *their* view on their situation (ibid; original emphasis).

In a similar vein, Marita Eastmond, a social anthropologist who has carried out extensive narrative research with refugees for many years, strongly advocates that as social researchers, we need to persist listening to refugees, and interpreting and telling their stories:

[w]e 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 (Eastmond, 2007: 261).

Where the previous chapter outlined a clear human and political rationale for listening to and engaging with personal refugee stories, these scholars (Ekstein, 1999; Harrell-Bond and Voutira, 2007; and Eastmond, 2007) suggest a strong epistemological and methodological rationale for carrying out narrative research with refugees. Consequently, this chapter will clarify how this study is situated in a narrative theoretical and methodological framework.

A Narrative Approach to Studying Refugee Lives

In 'forced migration' discourses, there has been an increased focus on the structural aspects of 'forced migration', and the notion of the individual refugee has become marginalised. Hathaway (2007: 2) suggests that this corresponds 'with preferred governmental and agency agendas which increasingly sacrifice the autonomy of the refugee himself or herself to broader migratory management goals', and warns us that such an approach is less focused on producing knowledge that is capable of 'challenging the downward spiral of the social and political commitment to respect the right of refugees' (ibid). Therefore, a need has been identified for an increase in a range of qualitative methodologies, which acknowledge the capacity for agency amongst refugees. In this context, Castles (2003: 30) highlights the benefits of participatory methods, whilst others emphasize a '*bottom-up approach*' to research, which is capable of using a 'refugee-centred perspective' (Voutira and Dona, 2007: 166). Researching refugee lives should acknowledge a world of progressively more complex refugee situations, should encompass the refugee's capacity to agency, and should take refugee experiences as its starting point. Nevzat Soguk therefore suggests an 'attitude' within research that is:

Oriented to comprehend the refugee events and experiences in their polymorphism, in their complexity, by posing the question of the refugee from the standpoint of the ways in which displaced people, the refugees themselves, labour to constitute and define their experiences of displacement.....[T]his attitude affords a space for the refugees by listening to a plethora of refugee voices (Soguk, 1999: 4-5).

In social research, the *biographical turn* (Chamberlayne, 2000) suggests that listening to life stories can assist in understanding how individuals interpret their lives within a cultural and structural context. Biographical methods can offer an understanding of social

change which takes the individual perspective and situates it in a wider social setting, thereby including the meanings that individuals give to their experiences of social or structural changes (Roberts, 2002: 5). Since this study is interested in how the personal stories of refugees are situated in a network of power relations, life story research will be useful in providing the methodological framework to this study (Plummer, 1995, 2000; Chamberlayne et al, 2000, 2002; Roberts, 2002; Denzin, 1989; 2001; and Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; 1998).

As well as an in-depth analysis of how wider social changes penetrate individual lives, and how individual refugees make sense of these changes, interpreting personal narratives is of interest especially in refugee research, because they enable an insight into the diversity of refugee experiences, rather than accepting ‘over-generalised notions’ of refugee lives. Furthermore, a life story approach with refugees enables the investigation of ongoing processes in personal lives, since the ‘holistic approach of the biography leads to broader depictions of individuals’ identities both across time and in the social networks that support them (Miller, 2000: 9; see also Bertaux, 1995).

Studying personal lives as ongoing processes is possible because as Dilthey (1976; see also Eastmond, 2007: 251) would argue, the urge to give meaning to experiences emerges from being confronted with events which disturb the daily regularity of life, experiences of insecurity, turbulence and violence, which coerce people to make sense of as well as confront their dilemmas. Stories then are a crucial tool in understanding what is happening to us, as well as a way of negotiating possible solutions, or ways forward.

Eastmond explains very well how important the telling of stories is, especially when confronted with the experiences that refugees face:

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 (2007: 251).

Using a narrative approach to researching refugee lives is beneficial to this study, because it facilitates an understanding of how individual refugee lives unfold in a whirlwind of events over which the refugees themselves have little control. Using life story interviews as a data collection technique is also beneficial to refugees, because although it is not without risk¹³, participants have the opportunity to share their experiences, which can be empowering for refugees, because it is an indication that their views are taken seriously in a situation where often their views do not matter at all. It can also restore ‘a sense of their own agency’ and a claim for the ‘right to be heard’ (Powles, 2004: 17-20).

The study into the lives of individuals is a swiftly growing area of social research that attempts to offer an understanding of how individuals give meaning to the social, political and cultural processes in which they live their lives (Plummer, 1995, 2000; Chamberlayne et al, 2000, 2002; Roberts, 2002; Denzin, 1989; 2001; and Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; 1998). In the following section of this chapter the attention will turn to

¹³ Sharing personal experiences in a narrative interview setting potentially invades one’s privacy, and for people who have traumatic experiences, it can be psychologically very demanding. In the case of refugees, some information can be politically sensitive. Please see *life story interviews* below for a more in-depth discussion of potential risks for the story teller.

the variety of theoretical approaches that engage with life story research, but firstly it will attempt to clarify some of the terminology used.

Theoretical Approaches to Narrative Research

Early influences on the biographical approach are to be found in nineteenth century Germany where Wilhelm Dilthey (1976) was concerned with the use of interpreting human experiences in studying the social world. He advocated that the ‘hermeneutic’ approach to studying the social world should be considered as fundamentally different from natural science methodology. His work was one of the influences on Robert Park at the Chicago School of Sociology, where life history methodology became the main approach to studying social life. One crucial study in the early part of the twentieth century was *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* by Thomas and Znaniecki (1984), which depicted the life story of Wladek Wisniewski, a Polish immigrant to America, and explicitly used the personal story of Wladek to gain an insight into a pivotal public concern of the time, namely the immigration and settlement of large numbers of Polish people into urban areas in the US¹⁴.

Herbert Blumer explains how members of the Chicago School took the issue of human beings as *living*, and as being instrumental in organising their own lives, as a starting point for their methodological approach:

If one reflects on it, I think the fundamental premise in the case of Park and Thomas and the associates there at Chicago is just that of recognizing that a human group consists of people who are *living*. Oddly enough this is not the picture which underlies the dominant imagery in the field of sociology today.

¹⁴ In 1914 Chicago ‘ranked as the third largest Polish centre in the world – after Warsaw and Lodz’ (Plummer, 2000: 104).

They think of society or group as something that is there in the form of a regularized *structure* in which people are placed. And they act on the basis of the influence of the structure on *them*. This is a complete inversion of what is involved and I would say the antithesis of the premise that underlay the work of Park and Thomas with their recognition that there are people, wherever you find them constituting a group – a small group, or a huge society or an institution or what not – there are people who are engaged in living, in having to cope with situations that arise in their experience, organizing their behaviour and conduct in the light of those collective arrangements which are ongoing affairs. And this, it seems to me, is the thing that particularly marks the position of the so-called Chicago School (Herbert Blumer, in Lofland, 1980; and in Plummer, 2000: 103; emphasis in original).

Since individual lives unfold within the contours of political, social and structural settings, life stories are not ‘transparent renditions of reality’. Studying individual lives therefore means interpreting how they are embedded in wider social processes (Eastmond, 2007: 252), which Miller (2000: 9) describes as a ‘perspective that emphasizes the placement of individuals within an ongoing and evolving social structure’. He continues to explain the Chicago approach to life story research as taking into consideration the idea that social structures constrain as well as enable individual agency, thereby also including a person’s capability in understanding and creatively responding to such constraints or opportunities (ibid: 6). Thomas and Znaniecki emphasized the usefulness of life story research in studying the social world, ‘it is evident that it must include both kinds of data involved in them – namely, the objective cultural elements of social life and the subjective characteristics of the members of the social group’ (1984: 57-8).

Although conceptually the renewed interest in biographical research can be traced back to the Chicago School of the early twentieth century, Miller (2000: 7) suggests that the recent emergence of life story research forms part of the ‘qualitative backlash’ against the

dominance of the quantitative approach, which was heavily influenced by C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination*, (1959: 159; see also Miller, 2000), in which he advocates the use of biographical methods in an attempt to understand the social world:

[S]ocial Science deals with problems of biography, of history, and of their intersections with social structures....these three – biography, history, society, - are the coordinate points of the proper study of man.

Since this study is interested in how refugee lives unfold within specific social settings, how they make sense of their experiences and manage to shape their lives against a background of quite severe structural constraints, a methodological framework which involves the life story approach is appropriate because it enables an insight into individual lives well as social settings.

Defining Life Stories

When taking on the subject matter of personal experience stories, one is inundated with a variety of names for different methodological techniques to describe the experiencing, telling, recording and interpreting of peoples' lives, which is partly due to cross-disciplinary use of biographical methods, but is also a result of the different theoretical approaches that underpin the research into individual lives (Roberts, 2002). Words such as life, life story, life history, oral history, biography, autobiography, or personal experience story are just some of the vocabulary used to describe the events, experiences of events, and the telling of these experiences (Denzin, 1989).

These terms can be used interchangeably to name the story of personal experiences, the pattern of inquiry into these stories, and the subsequent interpretation by the audience, or

researcher (Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995: 124). There are no strict definitions, or as Norman Denzin (1989: 47) would argue, the ‘word *biographical*, implying as it does the ability to write or inscribe words on a life, eludes fixed meaning,.....’. A plain and unambiguous clarification of terms therefore is necessary, not only to describe adequately what is meant by words such as story, narrative, life story, or refugee story, but also because it will facilitate an outline of the theoretical perspectives that underpin the methodological approaches used in this study.

When individuals tell something of the personal experiences they have of the events in their lives, they do not merely ‘record the experience’, but they do so in ‘storied form’ (Clandinin and Connelly, 1998). Where an *event* can be defined as ‘anything that takes place or happens, esp. something important; happening; incident’¹⁵, stories can be seen as the closest one can come to experience. It is part of human life to tell stories of our experiences, first to the self and then to others. An interesting idea is the concept of ‘narrative knowing’ or ‘narrative cognition’ (Bruner, 1986, in Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995: 126; and Polkinghorne in Clandinin and Connelly, 2000: 15), which can be explained as the means by which each individual becomes aware of, and expresses their understanding of the events in their life. We arrange this ‘narrative knowledge’ of our experiences as stories, and share it with others in ‘storied narrative forms’. Therefore, it is through the telling of stories that we learn to understand our experiences, learn to make sense of ourselves in relation to those experiences, and in relation to the event we have the experiences of.

¹⁵ The Collins English Dictionary (2003)

In this context, Hatch and Wisniewski (1995: 126) characterise life story research as ‘sharing narrative knowledge through the telling of stories’ and argue that narrative research is defined by narrative knowing. They explain the stories that we choose to tell as ‘products’, which resembles Plummer’s clarification of the telling of stories as ‘story products’ (Plummer, 1995: 20-21). For Plummer stories are produced through the ‘joint actions’ of three types of ‘story producers’. The first is the ‘story teller’, who writes or tells about their personal experiences, to researchers, therapists, or the press. The second ‘producer’, is the ‘coercer’, who listens, who interviews, and who has the power to influence how the story is told. The third ‘producer’ is the ‘consumer’, the reader, the audience of the story. How a story is consumed depends on the community it feeds in to, each community will give it a different interpretation. For example, a refugee story might be received with care and understanding by a community counsellor, and with suspicion and prejudice by an immigration officer. ‘Story products’ emerge from the joint actions of these three groups, and contain the meanings that each story producer has inscribed into the story (ibid: 20-21).

A further way of distinguishing between different layers of telling the stories of individual lives, and perhaps one that is very useful to this study is to be found in the work of anthropologist E.M. Bruner (1984), who distinguished between a life as lived, a life as experienced, and a life as told:

A life as lived is what actually happens. A life as experienced consists of the images, feelings, sentiments, desires, thoughts, and meanings known to the person whose life it is. One can never know directly what another individual is experiencing, although we all interpret clues, and make inferences about the experiences of others. A life as told, a life history, is a narrative, influenced by the

cultural conventions of telling, by the audience, and by the social context (Bruner, 1984: 7).

Theorising narrative research involves engaging with the interpretation of different layers of reality within life stories. As Bruner explains a *life as lived* is what I would describe as the events, that what actually happened. A *life as experienced* is where the individual whose life it is begins to make sense of the events in their life through ‘narrative knowing’, which results in the telling of life stories, to the self, and to others. A *life as told*, is where the life story is told to an audience, and influenced by wider social, political and cultural processes, it is what Plummer means by ‘story products’, and what I would name ‘narrative’. Life story researchers and narrative inquirers usually only have access to lives as told. Through the process of listening to and interpreting stories, narrative researchers can attempt to understand what a person’s experiences are, how they make sense of them, and how they relate them to the wider social settings in which they live. Finally, Eastmond (2007: 249) adds a fourth dimension, *the life as text*, which she explains as the story as interpreted and depicted by the researcher, and where the:

[n]ature 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 a text. As a result, an experience is never directly represented but edited at different stages of the process from life to text (ibid).

To summarise, this study will maintain a similar distinction, therefore, the experiences of events will be named *story*, the inquiry into such experiences *life story* or *life story research*, and the researcher’s interpretation *narrative*, or *personal narrative*. The role of the narrative researcher is to ‘describe life experiences, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experiences’ (Clandinin and Connelly, 1998).

Different Perspectives

Some would argue that defining the different layers of narrating one's life is in itself sufficient, that it is possible to accurately represent the events in a life through storytelling. However, others would hold the viewpoint that to understand how a person makes sense of the events in their life, we need to interpret and analyse how a story is constructed. Denzin (1989: 28) suggests that biographical research per definition assumes that there is a lived life that 'can be studied, constructed, reconstructed, and written about'. The question of whether 'life history [is] primarily *history*, or an exercise in *self-construction*' (Powles, 2004: 6-7; original emphasis) reflects wider ontological debates in narrative theory and methodology, social theory and philosophy.

Jerome Bruner (2001: 26-7) informs us that many writers during the nineteenth century believed in the possibility of representing a life as a genuine replica of reality, and thought it was possible to write a life 'independent of the processes of constructing' it, which echoed the dominant empiricist and positivist doctrines of the time. For example, Emile Durkheim considered social reality as existing in its own right, *sui generis*, and consisting of 'social facts', which he defined as:

Any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint...which is general over the whole of a given society whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations (1988: 59).

If social facts appear independently of the processes that construct them, then it must be possible, through the use of scientific method, to make exact copies. In this context, in order to represent a life accurately a narrative researcher would merely need to 'capture it, write it down' (Bruner, 2001).

At the other end of the spectrum we find the more constructionist perspective, which acknowledges that social reality is not a scientific object, and does ‘not stand still to have its picture taken’ (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). The constructionist perspective has its origins in German idealism of the nineteenth century (Woodiwiss, 2005: 16), and is reflected in Weber’s interpretivism (1948; 1949), as well as in the work of the aforementioned Dilthey (1976: 116, in E. M. Bruner, 1986: 4), who claimed ‘reality only exists for us in the facts of consciousness given by inner experience’, by which he meant that ‘lived experience, as thought and desire, as word and image, is the primary reality (E. M. Bruner, 1986: 5). Contemporary approaches to narrative research mirror quite closely Dilthey’s early sentiments, which is clearly evident in Bruner’s statement that ‘we have come to reject the view that a ‘life’ is anything in itself and to believe that it is all in the constructing, in the text, or text making...[the concern is] with literary-historical invention, with form, with the *depiction* of reality’ (Bruner, 2001: 27, original emphasis; see also Powles, 2004).

Some scholars prefer not to adhere to either one or the other extreme perspective, and suggest that there are both real structural processes in life, and that people do socially construct the world as they tell stories of it (Fay, 1996). Bruner (1984: 6-7: my emphasis) suggests that both lived stories and told stories are linked to ‘incidents *and* accounts, or in the most general sense, to any event *and* its representation’. He believes that ‘no representation can fully exhaust the images, feelings, and meanings emergent from an event’, but also that lived experience needs to be represented through language. Experiences of events cannot be acknowledged without language, even though language may never adequately describe lived experiences. Although a life as lived, a life as

experienced, and a life as told are closely connected and correspond with one another (Turner, 1982) it is crucial not to confuse them. Whether we name them told stories, life histories or narratives, they are ‘accounts, representations of lives, not lives as actually lived’.

An interesting perspective on this debate is the work of Alessandro Portelli (2003; 1998: 26; see also Powles, 2004), who advocates that a socially embedded narrative, or life history passes through a ‘shifting scale’ between lived stories and told stories, and that telling stories is about ‘real’ events as well as about constructing the self. In this context, the main task of the narrative researcher is to ascertain ‘where one ends and the other begins’ Powles, 2004: 7), to ‘explore the textured and contradictory space between *structure* and *agency*’ (Alexander, 2004). Therefore, the main focus of this study is to figure out to which extent a refugee life is ‘told’ by already existing powerful social narratives, underlying structural processes, or dominant discourses, or the extent to which people, in this case refugees, make decisions about the events they encounter in their lives, tell stories of their experiences, and in this way are ‘agents’ in shaping their own lives.

From the constructionist viewpoint the focus of narrative research should be on analysing how individuals construct their experiences into a narrative form, not on the ‘true’ events that underlie these experiences. In this study I aim to obtain the viewpoint of the people that are perhaps affected most by the political and economic insecurity which are consequences of ‘real’ events inherent in a postmodern, globalised world. Although I adhere to a constructionist perspective to a certain extent, and believe in the human

capacity for agency intrinsic in the notion of shaping our lives through telling stories of it, I find it difficult to accept that structural processes are completely ‘constructed’ or ‘imagined’. As I argued in the previous chapter, globalising developments, rather than eroding social structures, have given rise to new forms of structural processes, which, although largely ‘invisible’, continue to penetrate deeply into individual lives (Rustin and Chamberlayne, 2000: 7-8).

With regards to refugees, who experience the often very harsh consequences of ‘events’ and/or ‘underlying structural processes’, I believe the experiences of violent conflict, border control, or torture by secret police can not be interpreted as imagined, or as non-events, especially when many participants showed me the physical scars that these events left behind¹⁶. In this context, I feel that approaching participants’ experiences from a completely constructionist viewpoint would not allow for enough sensitivity, and may not take their experiences seriously.

In my view we develop narrative knowledge¹⁷ of ‘real’ events, which we tell to the self and to others in narrative form, as stories. The way in which we develop narrative knowledge, and transform our experiences into language is open to many different influences. The way in which refugees acquire narrative knowing will involve their personality, their experiences of the situation in their homeland, their family, community, as well as the more dominant narratives about refugees as shaped by a statist political

¹⁶ During the course of the fieldwork, many participants discussed the physical consequences of their situations, and I have been shown bullet-holes, scars, missing toes and missing teeth

¹⁷ In some cases, where events have been quite extreme, it may take some time before the person who has experienced this event can transform their experiences into narrative knowing

paradigm, mediated through political discourses, media images, policy settings, and public opinion.

As a narrative researcher, rather than blindly accepting mainstream discourses which carry dominant meanings, I believe that studying individual life stories has the potential to offer an insight into how individuals construct the self in relation to ‘real’ events in their lives, as well as facilitating an understanding of these events, which may otherwise remain concealed in mainstream political and social narratives. In this context, I do not claim to ‘give voice to refugees’, but rather, as Harrell-Bond and Voutira (2007: 11) suggest, attempt to interpret their individual lives within current theoretical and political debates, which is illustrated by Hayden White’s question ‘how do you transform “telling into knowing” in a way that the private self becomes part of a wider cultural narrative’ (in Harrell-Bond and Voutira, 2007: 11).

Negotiating Access: Exploring the Field

Gaining access to refugee communities, and to individual refugees in order to carry out a research study is difficult and time consuming (Harrell-Bond and Voutira, 2007). Given the delicate nature of this study, negotiating access and to be trusted as a researcher, were issues I gave a lot of thought and attention. The aim of this study is to explore the network of power relations that surround refugee stories by listening to the personal stories of refugees. Since refugees and asylum seekers are often categorized, stigmatized and stereotyped as one homogeneous group, in the media, as well as in the immigration and asylum policy framework, it was my intention that the refugees’ personal narratives

would be as diverse as possible. In order to capture the vast diversity of experiences that make up refugee lives, I interviewed people from a variety of backgrounds.

I did not focus on any one particular community, because I did not want the study to be about one particular country, or about the experiences of one particular group, and I opted for diversity in interviewees, in terms of length of residence in the UK, immigration status, and national or ethnic background. I also did not make the legal/political distinction of asylum seeker or refugee, and included anyone who had claimed asylum in Britain, regardless of whether they had been granted any form of Leave to Remain. Approaching the field research in this manner meant I had to negotiate access a number of times, with different communities, different kinds of refugee community organizations, as well as with individual refugees. Negotiating access became a lengthy procedure that I had to conduct right up to the end of the fieldwork stage of the study.

Although ethical considerations in social research are always important, they become almost pivotal in the use of personal experience methods. Especially when the social group under investigation, refugees, is amongst the most vulnerable in our society, and the sensitive issues of which they can tell, may include experiences such as rape and torture. Literature on qualitative interviewing suggests that fulfillment of personal and ethical obligations to interviewees involves not only confidentiality and anonymity, but also openness and honesty about the study, and respect for research participants (Rubin and Rubin 1995: 93-101). In this study however, I feel that ethical considerations need to go beyond that. Given the delicate nature of this study, in forming personal relationships with refugees, ethical principles such as 'sensitivity' (Sieber, 1993), 'an ethic of care' and

‘minimising harm’ (Plummer, 2000: 229) have been at the forefront of my approach to participants, starting from the moment of negotiating access, through the interviewing process, as part of ensuring a practice of ‘aftercare’, and during analysis and writing up of the life stories.

Life story research is not so much preoccupied with a large representative sample in order to assert new general theories, instead qualitative researchers are more interested in ‘information rich’ contributions (Plummer, 2000: 133). Initially I used the selective sampling technique, followed by snowball sampling. Accessing participants through selective sampling meant I purposely chose people who met certain criteria, individuals who had come to the UK as refugees and had claimed asylum here. I made no distinction in whether they had been granted leave to remain, or how long they had been here. Towards the latter stages of fieldwork I had established a network of contacts, and I was in a position to also use snowball sampling, where an interviewee would introduce me to another potential participant. It was hoped that this would enable me to access also some refugees who live more in isolation. It is difficult to research those who are isolated, who are ‘hard-to-find’ (Miller, 2000: 79), and I did not manage in all cases.

However, although most interviewees were accessed through community centers or language classes, I also met people who at the time of interview were very isolated, and very vulnerable. Moayad, for example, although at the time of interview he visited the Kurdish community centre regularly, he only did so once a week, he could hardly speak English, and spent most of his time by himself. Miranda would not ever leave her accommodation without her husband, and whilst he was at work, she spent most of her

time by herself in the bedsit where they lived. Many of the refugees I interviewed, had overcome some of the barriers they encountered when they first arrived in this country, such as Natalya, Anna or Amira. Although they were not isolated at the time of interview, they would during their stories tell me about how isolated their lives were when they first arrived, and how difficult it was to come out of this situation, for some it took a number of years.

In order to gain an insight into the social worlds that provide the backdrop for refugee lives, as well as into refugee experiences, I adopted several different strategies. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000: 63) would suggest, I aimed to situate myself:

[w]ithin the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space...*in the midst* - located somewhere along the dimensions of time, place, the personal and the social (original emphasis).

Firstly, as noted by Hammersley and Atkinson (1983: 78 in Silverman, 2000: 198) whilst negotiating access it is important to give a good impression to gate keepers and potential research participants, not only as a social researcher, but also as a person. Prospective interviewees will want to know whether you can be trusted, perhaps how friendly you are going to be. Therefore I initially made contact with two acquaintances who were refugees and worked in a shop in my local area. I had known them for a number of years and both had told me the stories about how they became refugees, prior to commencing the study. I approached them on an informal basis to discuss my project and to seek their advice on the most appropriate way to engage with refugee community groups and individuals. Their response was very positive and both contacts expressed interest in, and support for

the study, and they introduced me to the manager of a refugee community organization in North London.

A second strategy in immersing myself in the 'field' involved a local community centre, where I started work as a volunteer ESOL teacher for asylum seeking women with children. Although this work did not shape my analysis or interpretation of the data, working as an 'observer-volunteer' (Kissoon, 2006: 81) assisted me to gain confidence in my contact with refugees as vulnerable people, enabling a more in-depth approach to sensitivity and forming of trustworthy relationships. Discussing my study with community representatives, and potential interviewees also gave me an insight in how to carry out life story interviews with refugees in a way that would enable the participant to be actively involved in the interview process.

Further contacts were established through what Plummer (2000: 133) calls 'chance encounters', by which he means accidentally coming across material or a person who can help you in the right direction. I met someone who volunteered at a refugee project in West London, Refugees in Effective and Active Partnership (REAP). I made many visits to REAP and to their Community Advocacy Classes, where I presented my study with a request for participants. These visits and presentations resulted in many contacts, and sparked a trail of acquaintances and interviewees.

I was also introduced to a local authority community worker in South East London, with whom I formed a good working relationship, and who in turn introduced me to several refugee community organisations in Woolwich and Plumstead. Through these different

fieldwork situations, snowball sampling led to many contacts, often shifting the focus away from community projects into participants' lives and/or homes.

As mentioned earlier, because I used a number of different avenues in an attempt to access a variety of different communities and individuals, I needed to negotiate access almost right up to the end of the fieldwork phase. I always made sure that gate keepers were informed of what the research study was about, and that they knew me, not only as a social researcher, but also as a person. This proved an important aspect of the negotiating access stage of the fieldwork process, because the issue of trust, familiarity, and friendliness are crucial in finding potential interviewees, and prepare the ground for the more personal aspect of life story interviewing. This strategy proved beneficial to the research study, and most gatekeepers were welcoming and supportive. However, one refugee worker, although interested in the study, complained of 'research fatigue'. She indicated that there had been an increase in research interest in her client group; therefore she was uncertain that I would find someone willing to be interviewed. In addition, this refugee worker was very aware of the sensitivity of many issues in refugee lives, and very protective of her client group. After discussing my experience as a researcher, and my familiarity with refugee lives, it was agreed that I could leave some information sheets at the project, in case anyone was interested. Despite the gate keeper's resistance to my research activity, two people contacted me to be interviewed within one week. One of these participants had already been interviewed twice in the past few weeks, but insisted she did not suffer from 'research fatigue', instead she was adamant her story should be told as often as possible.

Semi Structured Interviews

Towards the end of the 'first phase' of the fieldwork, I had gained familiarity with the field, and sufficient knowledge of overall policy settings to commence the semi-structured interviews with professionals who work in the refugee field, which involved interviewing key persons in each of the different areas as described above.

The focus of the interviews was on the participants' views on the relationship between individual refugees and certain aspects of British society, such as asylum and immigration policies, procedures for and barriers to integration, effects of media portrayal, and hostilities towards refugees and asylum seekers. I originally believed refugee community representatives to be able to give this information because they have knowledge of individual refugee lives, as well as of the 'fabric' of British society. They work within the field, often forming the link between individuals, and structural processes, such as the asylum seeking procedure. However, it is important to include the views of many different sections of the community, or of the particular 'field' under investigation, and not to include the views of community representatives uncritically, or as representative of the whole community (Jan-Khan, 2006).

For example, I interviewed two male community centre managers, who were extremely helpful, and offered some great insights into the asylum seeking process in relation to individual stories, into the role of the voluntary sector in Britain, and on wider issues refugees are confronted with. However, they were proud of the achievements of their communities, emphasizing economic progress by telling me 'we now own most of the shops around here' (RW1), but carefully sidestepping questions about more isolated

members of the community. In addition, both responded positively when I asked to be introduced to their Women's Groups, and I was introduced to the coordinators of these groups. However, it proved quite difficult to set up a meeting, since Women's groups perhaps meet once a week for one hour, their coordinator does not have an office with a telephone, and even though I was introduced, and followed up these introductions with several phone calls, it was subsequently quite difficult to meet them again.

Therefore, instead of merely interviewing those who manage refugee community centers, I decided to include a wider range of different professionals who work with refugees. This included refugee community workers, a local authority education officer, and other key stakeholders in projects, including a manager of a detention centre befriending scheme, and a manager of a refugee counselor training project, making up a total of 12 semi structured interviews, which were carried out in 2004 and 2005.

Since the study needed more specific information about refugee lives in a social, political and policy setting, I opted for semi-structured interviews, rather than an unstructured format. As indicated by Rubin and Rubin (1995: 5) in their description of semi-structured interviews, I introduced the issues I wanted to discuss, and then guided the interviewee through the conversation, using more specific questions. Some interviews were quite unstructured, the participant discussed each topic in-depth, and didn't need much prompting. Other interviews however, were more structured, and the interviewees needed to be asked questions. I always conducted the interviews according to the 'pace' of the interviewee, attempting as much as possible to let them determine the course of the

conversation, thereby encouraging interviewees to be ‘active participants’, who take part in the interview as a ‘meaning-making project’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004: 150).

Through these interviews I hoped to gain an insight into refugee lives, and their relationship with the voluntary sector, the asylum and immigration policy framework, media images, and wider society. I approached research participants who I believed could provide me with the knowledge and understanding required in addressing my research questions, thereby focusing specifically on the themes identified during the ‘legwork’ or ‘observer-volunteer’ phase of the fieldwork. The preliminary visits and conversations resulted in four broad themes on which the interview questions were based. They included asylum policy and the asylum seeking process, the negative images of refugees and asylum seekers in the public sphere, participation in British society, at social, economic and political level, as well as the sharing of personal life stories.

The interviews were arranged directly with participants, and carried out at a time and location convenient to them, usually at the participant’s place of work. I always informed interviewees that interviews would take approximately one hour, and started each interview by thanking the participant for agreeing to be interviewed. This would be followed by a brief personal biography in relation to the context of the study. I would then explain the purpose of the study, and reassure them that their identities would remain anonymous and confidential. To conclude my introductory comments, I asked for permission to tape record (audio) the interview, and to take written notes. The first interview questions related to the participants’ role in the organization they worked for, and I would record this information on interview schedule sheets I had prepared in

advance. I employed this approach as an effort to ‘settle down’ and relax both the interviewee and myself.

During 2004 and 2005 I interviewed a total of 12 key persons in different parts of London, who were in a position to share their knowledge and experience of individual refugee lives within a political, social and policy setting. The data generated through these interviews gave me an insight into the relationship between individual refugees and the fabric of British society. Furthermore, interviewing refugee workers, visiting their places of work, and being ‘in the midst’ of the ‘field’ helped me gain access to many individual refugees, and assisted me to prepare for carrying out life story interviews.

These interviews yielded substantive data, which proved extremely useful as a background to the fieldwork of the study. The analysis based on these interviews formed the foundation for the subsequent life story interviews with individual refugees, and came to be part of the analytical framework which formed the starting point for some of the narrative analysis.

Life Story Interviews

The main focus of the fieldwork centered on the collection of 21 life stories of refugees, in an attempt to capture the diversity of refugee experiences against a background of social and political processes. The number of interviewees involved 12 women and 9

men, who came from 15 different countries, were of different age, and had come to Britain at different times.¹⁸ The interviews were carried out between 2004 and 2006.

Plummer (2001: 24) indicates that 'short life stories' are more easily understood by the researcher. This facilitates interpreting the narratives in a wider framework of social and political settings, which enabled me to weave stories together to 'create a larger map' of refugee lives in Britain. Short life story interviews can take between one and three hours, although Atkinson (1998: 24-25) suggests that a short life story interview should preferably be conducted over two or three meetings with the participant, making a total of three to five hours. Although some refugees only managed to give me a one hour and half interview in one sitting, often because they were busy with work or other responsibilities, with most interviewees I met up a number of times, carrying out interviews for a total of three to four hours.

The importance in the use of biographic methods is that the participant tells their life story in their own words. The interviewer should therefore create an interview setting which enables interviewees to have some freedom in shaping the content of their stories, and the themes these will address. In life story interviews, Tom Wengraf (2001: 111-114) suggests an interview design, which starts from a single initial narrative question, in an attempt to invite the interviewee to tell their story. The task of the researcher is merely to stay silent, and to keep interventions to a bare minimum. Atkinson (1998) on the other hand proposes that the researcher prepares a range of different questions to elicit a detailed account of a person's life. I felt that preparing a range of questions would set the

¹⁸ Please see Appendix A for a more detailed description of life story interviewees

interview agenda too rigidly, and therefore I used a single narrative question to initiate the interview, which was whether they would *tell me the story of their experiences of becoming a refugee, leaving their country, and living in Britain*. In addition, I prepared a range of prompting questions or comments to encourage them to carry on if they hesitated at any point. In this way I tried to make sure that participants could tell their story in their own words as much as possible, rather than following the logic of my questions, whilst being prepared to prompt them if necessary.

Dynamics of Power and Ethical Considerations

As I have suggested earlier, ethical considerations need to be an integral part of the narrative research process, from the moment of negotiating access, through the different stages of fieldwork and interviewing, to the final phase of analysis and writing up. As Clandinin and Connelly argue, ethical considerations ‘are never far from the heart of our inquiries no matter where we are in the inquiry process’ (2000: 170). I have throughout the research process been conscious of the skewed dynamics of power in the interviewer-interviewee relationship, and made reflecting on issues of power and ethics an integral part of my task as a narrative researcher.

In some situations I was introduced to a participant by a gate keeper, who I had often already interviewed, or who was very well informed about the study. At other times interviewees contacted me, because they were interested in the study, and wanted to contribute. I have been extremely aware that asking people to share their personal experience stories invades their privacy, and carries the risk of potential harm for the interviewee (Miller, 2000; Powles, 2004: 17-20). For people who have traumatic

experiences, it can be psychologically very demanding, and in the case of refugees, some information can be politically sensitive. As well as ensuring ethical practices of anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process, I always approached the participants with care and respect. If prior to the interview I felt that the interviewee was particularly vulnerable, I made sure that I was aware of the refugee's personal support network, as well as becoming informed of the refugee support network in their local area. In addition, I would spend time with the participant after the interview, until I was satisfied they would be alright. In some cases, the personal contact led to friendship, and with quite a few of the refugees I am still in touch.

Further ways of reducing the potential risks for interviewees, is to prepare thoroughly for the interview. Atkinson (1998: 28) proposes that interviewees need to really understand the aims and objectives of the study in advance, that permission to record the interview and/or take notes should always be sought, and having a friendly and supportive demeanor will help to 'establish rapport'. In order to create an encouraging and safe interview setting, I would initially meet participants on an informal basis, explaining the study and what the interview would be about, and that it would take between one and three hours, depending on what the interviewee would choose to tell me, with the possibility of more than one meeting if necessary and if they so wished. If meeting participants in person was not possible, I would establish a rapport by telephone.

I would also ensure I had some understanding of the participant's background prior to the interview, which involved being up to date on what was happening in their country at the time, closely following the news, or some more in-depth documentaries, thinking about

their history, their language, and considering their religious and/or cultural affiliations. Being prepared and informed showed the participants respect, and that I was genuinely interested in them. When I attempted to establish rapport, or find common ground, I found that interviewees were very keen to contribute to the process of getting to know each other. For example, with Hameed (Ref 5), an older Kurdish man from Iran, I was not sure we would have anything in common, or how to begin a conversation. When I met him he was the one who started the process, by asking which University I go to, he was interested in my student experience. He then told me about his years at University, how he loved studying and that he was very keen to contribute. We moved on to talk about Iran and the Netherlands, where he had relatives and friends, and continued to discuss European asylum policies. Once we both felt more at ease, I moved the conversation to Hameed's life story.

Participants were from the onset reassured that the interviews would be anonymous and confidential, that they could end participation at any time, and that they only had to tell me about experiences they felt comfortable with. As Powles (2004: 17-20) suggests, I always made sure participants understood how I would record the stories as data, that the PhD thesis would be solely for academic purposes, and that there might be some publishing of materials in the future. Initially I sought informed consent by asking participants to sign an informed consent form. However, participants often viewed these forms with suspicion, and did not want to sign anything that looked 'official'. I therefore decided to give them information sheets instead, which contained my personal details, information about the study, and contact details of City University.

There have been significant debates about the giving of gifts during the research process, emerging perhaps most notably through the influential work of French anthropologist Marcel Mauss (1954), who in his *Essai sur le don*¹⁹ offers an understanding of the nature of social relations. Mauss describes how the giving of gifts within traditional societies is accompanied by obligation and morality, through giving and receiving gifts a moral bond emerges between the people who are exchanging gifts.

There needs to be a balance between giving gifts, and ensuring that participants do not feel needy, or passive victims. During the fieldwork for this study, giving gifts or remuneration was not a formal part of the research design, there were simply no funds available to do so. However, in many cases small gifts included lunch, coffee, and books on English grammar.

These gifts were not always welcomed, on many occasions participants insisted on paying for my coffee, and one participant, whom I gave a small toy for her child, indicated that she was not happy about the gift. When I met Philippe, he accepted what I brought him, but also explained it made him feel bad: ‘I was a gentleman in my country, with a job, family, a house and a car. I had a good life..... I used to help the poor, now I am in need’ (Ref 7). Philippe stated that he felt ashamed of being in need, it made him feel undignified, which raises the issue of understanding that it is difficult to receive²⁰.

¹⁹ Mauss, M. (1954) *The Gift: Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*

²⁰ For an interesting discussion of ‘giving’ during fieldwork see Lammers (2005) ‘Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Anthropologists: the Taboo on Giving’ Working Paper No. 29 in *Global Migration Perspectives* Geneva: Global Commission on International Migration downloaded from www.gcim.org

Giving did not always occur in the shape of material gifts, it also involved taking people for a walk, especially those who were more isolated, and hardly ever left their accommodation. Listening to people was very important, even if it was not at all directly useful to my study. I listened to people's experiences of the British asylum and integration system, their health problems, worries about their family, and often also shared their jokes. Overall, friendliness and a genuine interest was very much appreciated. However, as discussed by Szczepanikova (2005) of her fieldwork in a Chechen refugee camp in the Czech Republic, it is very difficult to minimize the uneven power balance of the research process: 'It became clear especially when I was leaving the camp at the end of my fieldwork and realized how easy it was for me to move and how difficult it was for my informants who stayed behind' (Szczepanikova, 2005).

I had similar feelings when participants would call me, often long after an interview, when they had correspondence from the Home Office, a refusal (in Zarah's case), or a letter requiring more information (in Hope's case), and I knew I could not be useful. I could listen, give attention and support, but I could not change the asylum determination system, or wield any power at the Home Office for them. I could return to my life at any time, but they had to deal with their often precarious situation at all times.

However, through thorough preparation, investing time in getting to know interviewees prior to the interview, as well as care, respect and genuine interest, I developed trust, familiarity, and more personal relationships with refugees, which in turn assisted them to actively participate in the interview. Powles (2004: 17-20) notes how the sharing of personal experiences can be of some benefit to those who tell their stories. Sharing one's

personal narrative has the potential to be empowering for the story teller, especially for refugees, 'it is a sign that their experiences and perspectives do matter within a humanitarian system that tends to appear otherwise. It can help refugees be more aware of the social and political roots of their suffering, to give them a sense of their own agency, and to claim the right to be heard' (ibid).

Furthermore, it can be beneficial to refugees to 'unburden themselves' by talking about their past experiences, even if the listener is a researcher and not a therapist (ibid). Miller (2000: 104) on the other hand emphasizes that life story research is not therapeutic, and that participating in life story research puts people at risk of further traumatising. However, recent studies (Ager and Strang, 2004a, 2004b; Rutter et al, 2007) into refugee experiences of integration have indicated that socializing, forming bonds, making friendships and sharing experiences with members of the host population is of high importance to refugees in feeling a sense of belonging. During my research I met many refugees who contacted me in order to tell me their stories. They wanted to share their experiences, especially the traumatizing parts, with a sympathetic listener, because apart from immigration officials, or other civil servants and government officials, whom they would usually mistrust, they had no one else to do this with in their lives here. I always felt it was of extreme importance not to pressurize people into telling me things that they were not comfortable with. Many of the refugees told me of traumatic experiences, I believe because they felt the need to share these experiences in a setting that they were comfortable with. There remains some concern that interviewing those participants who are willing to share their experiences shapes the outcome of the research to some extent. However, given the sensitivity of the topics discussed in the life story interviews, it was

paramount that the refugees who contributed to this study did so willingly. One person who initially consented to being interviewed, withdrew her consent when she was contacted by the Home Office about her claim. She was too worried and did not want to jeopardize her claim in any way. I did not even attempt to persuade her to participate, but tried to make sure she was alright in the light of the developments with her claim for asylum. In this context however, it is important to note that the fact that I am a female researcher may have shaped the experiences that participants shared with me, and the way they told their stories. Some of the female participants for example, may have found it very difficult to talk about their traumatic experiences with a male researcher. In this sense the gender of the researcher potentially shapes the stories that are being told.

During life story interviews, the main task of the researcher is to listen, not just listen, but listen actively, being responsive, sometimes nodding in agreement, always making sure the interviewee knows you are listening. Atkinson names this listening with 'intense attentiveness' (1998: 32), and he notes that 'there is a listening that goes far beyond the normal realm of hearing what someone has said', a kind of listening which is 'the gift of leaving one's own life for a moment to travel in another's' (ibid). I have always taken the task of 'listening with intense attentiveness' very seriously, and carried out the life story interviews with the utmost sensitivity and ethical consideration, ensuring a practice of aftercare with the more vulnerable participants by staying in touch, and gradually moving them on to more appropriate services when they were ready (and if needed).

Reflecting on Researching Sensitive Issues

In listening to refugee stories, it is extremely important to be prepared to hear about experiences of trauma, violence, and of sheer desolation, since for refugees such experiences are part of everyday life. Many of the participants had experienced some level of chaos, uprooting, upheaval, or violent conflict. In some cases, this permeated their lives, and affected their participation in this study. Some of the refugees told me they had witnessed family members being killed, they had walked through mountains with their baby tied to their back, or had been imprisoned and tortured. Others cried when they told me about the hostility they experienced whilst trying to access services in Britain. Atkinson (1998: 20) captures very well the experience of life story interviewing:

It is impossible to anticipate what a life story interview will be like, not so much for how to do it but for the power of the experience itself...just witnessing, really hearing, understanding, and accepting, without judgment, another's life story can be transforming (Atkinson, 1998: 22).

One of the early interviews I carried out was with Zarah. Zarah contacted me, she had seen me present at the Community Advocacy class she attended, and was very eager to meet me and talk. Zarah told me from the beginning that she was receiving psychiatric treatment, and taking medication. I suggested we meet first informally for a chat, so I could discuss the study and some ethical issues with her in more depth. I also wanted to meet her to assess whether she was not too vulnerable to be interviewed. After we met, and also reflecting on the fact that I knew her support network quite well, I decided to do the interview. Zarah's story is a tale of extremely violent and deeply disturbing experiences. I felt very responsible for her wellbeing after we met, and stayed in touch to make sure she was alright. Furthermore, as a researcher, I believe that the responsibility

does not end there, but continues in how the story is ‘treated’ through the process of analysis, and presented as text in writing up the thesis. I have always made sure Zarah knew that her ‘life story’ was safe with me and we are still good friends now.

One of the more distressing fieldwork experiences was what I call *the interview that never happened*. On 10 June 2005, I was contacted by a refugee from Uganda, Proscovia, who had been in the UK with her three children since 2000. She had seen my information sheet at a project in Woolwich, and was very keen to tell me her story. On the day of the scheduled interview, I called her early, to ensure she remembered the appointment. She did not, she had forgotten, and was very apologetic, but told me she had something else to do, but really wanted to meet with me another time. We rearranged for Thursday 16 June.

On the day of the meeting, I was expecting a similar level of absent-mindedness, and again called early to make sure she remembered. This time she had been called to go to the Home Office to hand in ‘some papers’. She told me this was the reason that she had been so forgetful; she was very scared of detention or deportation, ‘I am always thinking about this, that’s why I forget things’ (Ref 13).

We rescheduled again, for the following week, but never managed to meet. On 22 June I received a message from the project worker in Woolwich, who told me that Proscovia was detained to be deported, together with her three children. She had been detained at Beckett House on Tuesday 21 June, was moved to Yarl’s Wood the following day, from where she was to be deported on Thursday 23 June at 8pm.

The workers at the project in Woolwich were trying to put together a campaign, and had been in touch with the National Coalition for Anti-Deportation Campaign, but they were not hopeful. I was very concerned for Proscovia's wellbeing whilst in detention, and tried to find out how she was coping. I contacted the detainee befriending scheme at Gatwick (GDWP), where I had some contacts. They gave me the number for a similar befriending scheme at Yarl's Wood, which I contacted. The person I spoke to was very helpful, but said he could not organise a visit, since there was a two week waiting list. He continued to tell me that if she was to be deported in the evening, a visit, or even giving a message, would only give her false hope, and that that would be cruel.

Proscovia was deported with her children at the scheduled time, and I never heard from her, or about her again. I hope she managed to make some kind of life again in Uganda, and although this interview never happened, I remember the sheer desperation in her voice every time we spoke on the phone.

I remember all of the stories the interviewees told, and the trust they gave me by doing so. Initially, I found analysis, treating such personal stories as 'scientific data', very difficult. I felt that since participants had trusted me, and confided in me, it was of the utmost importance to do their stories justice, at the level of science, as well as at a personal level. It was a difficult issue to overcome, but through listening to others scholars who had experience of listening to refugees, and reading their work, I began to see ways of engaging with my participants' stories scientifically, whilst still thinking of

them as personal contributions²¹. In my view, research ethics is not something that we discuss in one or two paragraphs at the end of the methods chapter. Instead, ethical considerations should be an integral part of the research process, starting from negotiating access, to meeting people, and interviewing them. It does not end there, in this study, through maintaining a balance between academic rigour and sensitivity to the personal refugee narratives, ethical concerns formed part of analysing the stories, and part of the process of interpretation and writing up.

Language

From the onset of this study I intended to include refugees whose command of the English language is in beginners stage, or who could not speak English at all. For those refugees that come here to claim asylum, not speaking English is very much part of their every day life, and in my view it is part of their stories. Due to lack of resources, and because of some methodological issues (on this see for example Temple and Edwards, 2006), the use of interpreters was not part of the initial research design. However, on one occasion, a member of the community who also worked at the community centre was used to carry out the interview, and on another occasion a family member initially helped with the interview, until he realized the interviewee and I could understand each other well enough.

Schuster and Solomos (2001: 22) note that where the language in which the interview takes place is the second language for both interviewer and interviewee, conversations to clarify specific concepts and/or experiences give deeper understandings of what is meant.

²¹ The work of Behzad Yaghmaian (2006) on migrant stories of Muslims on the journey West, and Jacobson and Landau (2003) on ethics in refugee research is very useful in this context.

During the life story interviews, rather than uncritically using shared meanings for terms such as asylum, integration or settlement, the exact meaning of such terms had to be explained by both researcher and interviewee, which created a more in-depth understanding and interpretation of concepts and experiences. It made some of the interviews very lengthy and labour intensive, both at interview stage, and during transcription and/or writing up of notes, but I felt quite strongly that although a person could not speak English very well, their stories should be included in the study.

One of the interviews was carried out in French. Although an interpreter had been organized by the drop-in centre where I was meeting this particular interviewee, when I arrived he was so eager to talk that he did not want to wait. He asked if I could speak French, and when I answered 'a little bit', he started to talk. I have studied French well enough to understand it if it is spoken quite clearly and not too fast. The participant spoke very clearly, and often I would repeat passages back to him to check that I had understood him properly.

Notes and Analysis

Although I originally intended to tape record all the interviews, I realised early on that this was not a realistic aim. I did not always manage to organise a meeting in a designated interview room, instead sometimes I took people for a walk, or met them for a coffee. In these situations I took extensive field notes of the interview. I always wrote up transcripts and field notes immediately after the interview, and if necessary checked with the participants that I had recorded the sequence of events, situations, and decision making processes correctly.

As mentioned earlier, I took the responsibility for the participants' wellbeing very seriously, and believed that ethical considerations should continue through analysis and writing up. I felt responsible for the stories of those who gave me their time and their trust, and initially I found it very difficult to start the process of analysing the stories as data, especially because participants had so freely made me the 'gift' of sharing their personal experiences, and I could reciprocate so little in return.²² I was concerned that I may not do the stories justice by interpreting them, breaking them up into segments, and treating the refugees' experiences 'coldly' as mere data, rather than as 'real' experiences of 'real' people.

Renato Rosaldo (1989) discusses how Weber believed in the possibility of approaching scientific enterprise as a detached, neutral, and morally disinterested social scientist²³. Rosaldo sees this as a caricature of Weber's perspective, a 'white coated image of neutral social science'. I was concerned that I would become like Weber's type of detached scientist if I engaged with the life stories as 'cold' data. And yet I knew that to interpret the stories, situate them within a policy background, or against the process of integration and settlement, I had to at some point start breaking them up in pieces, comparing them, moving them, re-organising them. It took a long time, but eventually I managed to distance myself enough from the stories to see them as data, without losing the sensitivity I had made such an integral part of the fieldwork.

²² Please see discussion on 'the gift' on page 72, earlier on in the chapter

²³ in Weber's 'Science as a Vocation' in Gerth, H. and Mills, C. W. (eds) (1948) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. London: Routledge

In terms of the actual analysis, there are many different ‘analytical lenses’ through which to engage with narrative data. For example, Rustin and Chamberlayne (2000: 8) employ a very rich mode of interpreting narratives, they carry out a ‘line-by-line micro-analysis’ through which they would ‘generate and test hypotheses as the text unfolds. These are both conjectures about the meanings that might be implicit in the fragment of narrative, and hypotheses about “what happened next” in a life story’. I would not have been able to hypothesise about the potential meanings in the stories, because I carried out and transcribed all of the interviews myself, often remembering whole passages in each of the interviews. Others suggest setting up what Lofland and Lofland name (1995: see also Plummer, 2000: 152) ‘core files’, ‘analytic files’ and a ‘personal log’, whereby core files contain the entirely unedited transcribed interviews, analytic files organize the stories according to themes, and the personal log contains all the notes the researcher makes about the research process.

Initially I organized the life stories according to themes in this way, thereby using the qualitative analysis computer program NVivo to facilitate this task. NVivo helped to code and organize the life stories into files, which were then easily retrievable. Although breaking up the stories into different data sets according to themes encouraged me to theorise them in different ways, it did not assist me in bringing clarity into how to use them as tool of critical analysis within a theoretical, or policy setting.

Another decision I needed to make regarded the level and extent to which I had to edit and interpret the life stories. There are different ways of analyzing, writing up and presenting life stories. Narratives can be presented as ‘raw’ data, with little editing or

interpretation, leaving them to ‘speak for themselves’. In contrast, they can be portrayed through a strong ‘interpretive framework’, which permeates the analysis. The life stories are combined with the author’s interpretations, and can be ‘adopted as merely illustrative of some theoretical and analytical perspective’ (Roberts, 2002: 46-7).

The main focus of this study is to offer an understanding of how refugee stories are subjected to a network of power relations, by investigating how refugees interpret their experiences within a political and structural context, how they make new lives, and considering whether refugees can be seen as *agents* in constructing their life stories. Therefore this study needs both an interpretive framework capable of analyzing individual narratives within a social and political setting, and an analytical approach which analyses the narrative structure and pattern of the life story, a perspective which leaves the story intact, and does not ‘cannibalize it by using fragments as juicy titbits to liven up a descriptive ethnography, or selecting isolated incidents to illustrate a theoretical point’ (Bruner 1989: 8-9).

The analytical approach I adopted capable of encompassing a strong interpretive framework whilst leaving the story intact consisted of what Lofland and Lofland (1995: 145–148) name the *activist* viewpoint, which takes *human agency* as a starting point, and in which humans are considered as ‘creative and probing creatures who are coping, dealing, designating, dodging, manoeuvring, scheming, striving, struggling, and so forth – that is as creatures who are actively influencing their social settings’. Considering refugees as *agents* has from the onset been part of the theoretical and methodological rationale for this study, and suits the overall approach to studying refugee lives.

Further analytical tools that have been extremely useful include Denzin's 'epiphany' (1989: 70-71), which he defines as 'interactional moments and experiences which leave marks on people's lives'. Bruner (2001) acknowledges a similar concept but names it the 'turning point', which I would define as critical moments; moments of crisis that change basic systems of meaning in one's life. Often it is an event or an experience that can lead an individual to make a life changing decision.

Finally, the concept of 'narrative knowing' (Bruner, 1986, in Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995: 126; and Polkinghorne in Clandinin and Connelly, 2000: 15), has been used to gain an insight into how individual refugees made sense of the events in their lives. What does being a refugee mean to those involved? How do they become aware of, and express their understanding of the events in their life? How have participants arranged the 'narrative knowledge' of their experiences as stories?

Conclusion

The sharing of personal refugee stories needs to compete with the discourses and narratives about refugees as represented by others, and personal refugee stories are subjected to an interwoven set of power relationships, through which they remain marginalized. This study aims to question how such stories are situated in this framework of power relations, and explores the extent to which refugees can be seen as *agents* in shaping their lives. Furthermore, it investigates issues such as the construction of individual refugee narratives in relation to the claiming of asylum within the British policy framework, and the relationship between individual refugee stories in a hostile

social climate. Finally, it analyses the individual strategies refugees adopt in making new lives, and how this helps them to develop social links, and new forms of solidarity.

Since this study is interested in how refugee lives unfold within specific social settings, a methodological framework which involves the life story approach is appropriate because it enables an insight into individual lives well as social, political and structural settings. Furthermore, life story method considers the notion of agency, is inclined to analyse the situation an individual is in and explore the individual strategies a person has devised in an attempt to overcome this situation. It is therefore useful in investigating how refugees manage to shape their lives against a background of quite severe political and structural constraints.

During the course of this study I have conducted twenty one life story interviews with individual refugees, and twelve semi structured interviews with refugee workers. This enabled an in-depth and extensive analysis of how refugees were forced to make the decision to flee, of the situation of claiming asylum in Britain, and of the strategies they employed in coping with this situation. Finally it assisted in explaining the process of settling in Britain, and helped to identify the strategies that people devised in overcoming the barriers to settlement.

Examining the life stories in terms of the structural constraints in matching the refugee stories to the criteria of the Geneva Convention in claiming asylum, as well as exploring individual strategies in overcoming such constraints and other barriers to settlement, led to an in-depth analysis of how individual refugee stories are situated in a framework of power relations.

Chapter Three

STATE, ASYLUM AND POLICY

Introduction

Although this study takes the notion of the refugee as a ‘capable agent’ as its starting point in both the theoretical and methodological framework, it is important to acknowledge the political and structural constraints on refugee lives, especially where these constraints create the contours within which individual refugee narratives will be told. This chapter will trace the contours that marginalise the refugee by discussing the relationship between the state, citizenship and asylum in a theoretical context. It will then move on to explore the historical background to the emergence of the international refugee regime, and describe the development of European and British asylum and immigration policy from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the contemporary New Asylum Model (NAM) in Britain.

In a restrictive paradigm international refugee regimes operate to exclude the refugee, and European as well as British asylum policy have developed in order to construct the refugee story as fraudulent and not credible, which denies them to be told freely, and makes it difficult for such stories to access a potentially sympathetic audience. Through examining how refugee stories are told and interpreted in structural processes such as asylum policy and the asylum seeking procedure, thereby critically examining the criteria by which asylum claims are decided on as ‘fraudulent’, ‘credible’, or deserving of ‘leave to remain’, this chapter will explore the relationship between the individual life stories of

refugees and the nation-state as part of the framework of power relations that influence refugee lives. It is therefore important to discuss the issue of asylum and the state on both a conceptual level, in relation to ‘international refugee regimes’, and national asylum and immigration policy.

A refugee claiming asylum in the United Kingdom is formally asking the British government to recognise them as a person who is seeking entry to the UK, in search of safety, under the rules of the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. They are entitled to protection under the Convention if they have a ‘well founded fear of persecution because of their ‘race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion’. There may be other humanitarian or convincing reasons a person fled their homeland, and Leave to Remain can be sought under the European Convention on Human Rights. In order to establish whether a person is entitled to protection in the UK, they have to make a claim for asylum to the Home Office, where it needs to travel through some stages in a specific ‘legal route’. Asylum claims are assessed on the basis of the individual circumstances of each case, and it is during the asylum determination procedure that the telling of, and listening to the life story of the refugee is a vital, if not, the main method by which the status of each individual asylum claim is determined (Amnesty International 2004; Jones, 2007).

The asylum seeking procedure is where the structural aspects of the state directly shape individual refugee lives. A person claiming asylum is a person who has left their country, because their state is unable or unwilling to protect them. The asylum seeking process is the means by which the receiving state determines whether a claimant had sufficient

reason to leave the protection of their own state, and subsequently, whether this person is ‘deserving’ of protection by the state in the country of arrival. It is during this process that refugees *have to tell their stories*, which need to be ‘credible’ and ‘verifiable’, preferably accompanied by evidence, such as documents or medical reports, and it is here that the fate of asylum seekers ‘depends on their ability to convey their experiences in a way that convinces increasingly skeptical host states of their authenticity’ (Eastmond, 2007: 259).

Foucault (1984: 197) would define this process as the ‘examination’ which he explains as ‘a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify, and to punish’. It is during the examination that the behaviour, physical characteristics, or subjective experiences of the individual ‘child, patient, madman, prisoner’, or refugee are no longer individual, but come to be documented, written, ‘described, judged, measured, compared with others’ (ibid). Refugees upon claiming asylum become asylum seekers, who lose their individuality and become a ‘case’, in need of being ‘trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded, etc’. Individual experiences become objectified, since the examination, or the asylum procedure, ‘manifests the subjection of those who are perceived as objects and the objectification of those who are subjected’ (Foucault, 1984: 197). The bureaucratic treadmill of the Home Office makes asylum seekers the ‘object of individual descriptions and biographical accounts....[it] functions as a procedure of objectification and subjection’ (ibid: 203-4). Therefore, the personal refugee story cannot be told freely during the asylum determination procedure, because the criteria that the story needs to meet are already in place.

As explained in the first chapter, in response to recent changes in the global political landscape Western states have yet been less willing to allow entry to refugees (Crisp, 2004). They have gradually started looking inwards, thereby reducing their commitment to human rights and solidarity with refugees, often thinking of refugees as threatening the nation's political and social order (Joly, 2002: 9). Not all aspects of this emerging paradigm are new. Although the focus of political debates has shifted towards containing refugees in their regions of origin, processing claims through the UNHCR and awaiting a decision in refugee camps has been common practice for some time. Schuster (2005: 18) is more concerned with developments in asylum policy (in different countries) toward the 'intention to return people from EU states without examining their claim to asylum', which would abandon the principle of *non-refoulement*, and relieve countries of arrival of 'any duty to those who do make it to the territory of European states' (ibid).

These changes in attitude towards refugees since the end of the Cold War have had a significant impact in Britain, where a body of asylum and immigration legislation has established a policy framework that severely restricts entry to the UK and speeds up the asylum application process, in a way that places the Government in a position of almost complete control of the asylum procedure, and the lives of asylum seekers during their claim for asylum, whilst increasing the ability to remove and deport people once they have been refused (IPPR, 2003: 40-41). It is important to note that although asylum policy has developed to make the removal of 'failed asylum seekers' possible, many of those whose claim has been rejected are not deported, often through no fault of their own, and end up living in destitution. Amnesty International believes that 'rejected asylum seekers are being made destitute to force them to leave the UK'. This policy does not

seem to be working since many destitute rejected asylum seekers remain, ‘living from hand to mouth, surviving on the charity of others, their dignity stripped away by this existence’ (Amnesty International, 2006).

The procedure for asylum applications and decision-making on claims has developed within the contours of this policy framework, which seems more concerned with restricting entry to those in need, than with offering them a place of safety. It has become extremely difficult for any claim for asylum to be recognized as meeting the criteria of the Refugee Convention, and the requirements of British policy, which has placed an even heavier burden on the personal refugee story as the basis for such a claim. Through outlining an extensive literature review of the concept and practice of asylum, this chapter will create a theoretical and policy based understanding of the political and structural context of individual refugee lives. It will examine how UK asylum policy has developed into its current form within an international context, and explore the effects of these policy developments on the asylum determination procedure, where personal refugee stories form the basis on which asylum claims are made. In this way I will attempt to offer an understanding of the relationship between political developments, asylum policies and procedures, and the role of individual refugee stories, thereby paying particular attention to the issue of ‘credibility’.

Refugees or Migrants?

The practice of asylum in relation to institutions such as the state or citizenship, and in relation to processes such as globalisation, often falls within the wider debate of migration. Work by scholars such as Stephen Castles and David Miller (2003), Christian

Joppke (1998; 1999), or Saskia Sassen (1998) engages with topics such as migration and citizenship, immigration as a challenge to the nation-state, or migration and globalisation. Refugees and asylum seekers in this context become a type of migrant, which tends to blur the distinction between refugees and other types of migrants. The question of whether one should make this distinction is, as we shall see, not merely an issue of politics and economics, but one of some moral debate.

The classic distinction between refugees and other types of migrants is that refugees are involuntary or forced migrants, who leave their countries for political reasons such as ‘experiences of war, civil unrest, political instability, violence, death of family members, torture, and poverty’ (Bloch, 1999: 3). Other types of migrants are considered to have migrated voluntarily, and mainly for economic reasons. For the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees a refugee is considered a person forced to flee their country for political reasons, and this is quite clear in their definition of a refugee:

A refugee is a person who ‘owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself to the protection of that country (UNHCR, 1951).

However, others argue that it is difficult to make a clear distinction between refugees and economic migrants. For example, Castles and Miller (2003: 32) argue that in developing countries, traditional social order as well as economic organisation have been destroyed by processes such as colonisation, industrialisation and globalisation, which has also led to the reformation of states and nations. Therefore, there are close relationships between poverty, unstable government, conflicts between different social groups, and human

rights abuse. They identify this as the ‘migration-asylum nexus’, through which they explain all population movements as ‘symptomatic of modernisation and globalisation’, and which attempts to demonstrate the complex relationships between the factors that cause both refugees and other types of migrants to leave their home countries. As Castles and Miller (2003: 32) describe it ‘[T]hese conditions lead to both economically motivated migration, and politically motivated flight’.

This is a strong argument, and many refugees and/or migrants may well be leaving countries in both economic and political upheaval. However, immigration policies in countries of arrival are such that those who wish to enter and settle must make their reasons for migration very clear. Although receiving states have the power to control the entry of both forced and voluntary migrants, they do acknowledge a ‘moral’ obligation (to some extent at least) to refugees, which is not recognised in the case of economic migrants. It is the acknowledgement of this obligation by states that is the main area of distinction between refugees and other types of migrants (Schuster, 2003: 24).

For many academic writers on asylum at present, asylum is a human rights issue. ‘[T]he argument that asylum seekers are vulnerable people in need of protection can only be made by stressing that asylum seekers are not migrants, and that they have a special claim of entry’. Including refugees and asylum seekers in the wider migration debate, diminishes the humanitarian issues of the refugee problem, thereby providing to governments reasons for restricting entry to all. However, maintaining the argument that refugees and economic migrants are different, and that refugees have a special claim to entry on a humanitarian basis carries the risk of a ‘ranking of need’ (ibid, 2003: 33-34).

[B]y accepting the distinction between migrant and refugee, a distinction based on the political/economic divide, human rights defenders are privileging the violation of political and civil rights, and ignoring the violation of other social and economic rights. Liberal democratic states are generally prepared to accept such a distinction because the number of people whose political and civil rights are disregarded are far fewer than those who have no work, no income, no food, no health care, and no education (Schuster, 2003: 34).

The question of whether one should distinguish between refugees and migrants is not so easy to answer, nor do I aim to do so in my study. It is however an important question to ask, because considering refugees as a type of migrant enables states to close their borders to all kinds of migrants, whilst on the other hand, acknowledging a special claim to asylum for political refugees accedes to a system that prefers one set of rights over another. This means that a person who wants to enter Britain because they have suffered torture or violence has more right to do so than someone who comes here because they and their families are hungry, and have no hope of a future in their own countries. As policy makers, what kind of moral stance would a government need to take to make this kind of decision? How can one decide what kind of suffering is in more urgent need of assistance?

Although inconclusive, this discussion demonstrates that it is possible to have a rational and honest debate about the differences between forced and voluntary migration. Unfortunately, in political discourses, this discussion is neither rational nor honest, and it largely ignores the moral aspect of the debate. Instead, in recent decades in Britain, political discourses have produced knowledge about refugees and migrants, which has created confusion, and some very negative images of refugees (Lewis, 2005)²⁴. In a ‘culture of disbelief’, the stories that asylum claimants tell as the basis of their claim for

²⁴ Please see chapter four for further discussion of economic migrants and refugees

asylum, are received with suspicion and wariness, both during the asylum determination process and in wider society. From the moment they arrive, refugees are considered as people who will fabricate ambiguous stories about their experiences.

This chapter seeks to offer an understanding of how refugees interpret their experiences within a political structure such as the state, and a structural practice such as the claiming of asylum within the British policy framework. It will explore the relationship between the individual life stories of refugees and the state through examining how refugee stories are told and interpreted in structural processes such as asylum policy and the asylum seeking procedure. It is therefore important to discuss the issue of asylum and the state on both a conceptual level, and in relation to ‘international refugee regimes’ and national asylum and immigration policy.

The Modern Nation-State and the Practice of Asylum

The emergence of the nation-state has been considered a necessary condition for the arrival of modernity, because its secure structure, and the nationalist beliefs that accompanied it, underpinned the idea of progress, the development of capitalism, and made the industrial revolution possible (Schwartzmantel, 1998: Ch 6). Although it is debatable whether modern life brought more freedom to individuals in our society (Bauman, 1997: Ch 6; 2000: Ch 1), it is quite clear that, where for most citizens of Western states freedom, and claims to social, political and human rights are at the very least negotiable, refugees and asylum seekers have few or no rights, and even less freedom.

For Hannah Arendt (Canovan, 1992: 33-34) those who are stateless lack the ‘right to *have* rights’, because they are not citizens who belong to a political community. Citizens of a modern nation-state are believed to share a common culture, national myths, an economy, and rights and duties (Smith, 1999: 38). From the nationalist’s perspective, the state, this apparatus of political control, is the best possible option to protect and defend its people, and its national identity.

The notion of a nation-state is sustained by the principle of ‘sedentariness’, which means that settlement, belonging to a nation-state as a citizen, is the basis from which human life is shaped and organised, and any form of migration is seen as a deviation from this. Nevzat Soguk, in his book *States and Strangers* advocates the idea that knowledge that prevails in dominant discourses on refugees begins from the premise that the citizen who belongs to a modern nation-state is the norm, ‘the proper subject of political life’ (Soguk, 1999: 9). Beginning with this premise, the refugee is neither represented, nor protected by the state, but instead displacement and statelessness become the ‘ascribed identity’ of the refugee. The ‘processes of statecraft’ inevitably problematise a person who does not fit into the ‘citizen/nation/state hierarchy’ as a refugee.

The idea of the citizen as the norm, and the refugee as the problematic ‘other’, reflects the nationalist viewpoint. The world is seen as ‘naturally’ divided into nations, each with its own clearly defined national character. National identity forms the central feature of the citizen’s identity, and sense of belonging (Schwartzmantel, 1998). In opposition to this view, theorists such as Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson consider the nation as a socially constructed phenomenon. Where for Gellner (1999) a nation is ‘invented’, for

Anderson it is 'imagined' and 'created', '...nationality...nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts' (Anderson, 1991: 4).

The creation of this cultural artefact, of the nation, involves the fabrication of national myths, such as the shaping of an 'ideal' national identity, and the idea of the 'good' citizen. Those who fall outside this norm will be outsiders. Historian George Mosse (1978, 1991) in his work on the notion of nationalism against a background of the rise of national-socialism in Germany in the inter-war years, argues that the stereotypical image of an outsider is important in national myth making. It has the potential to create an 'enemy', a hostile image, against which members of the nation can define themselves. Mosse (1991: 321) advocates the idea that the 'indissoluble link between insider and outsider, is a hidden need of all modern society'.

Mosse argues that in modern society the 'outsider' has a social role to play, namely to provide the citizen with an antagonistic image against which they can define themselves as 'good' citizens with an 'ideal' national identity. The next chapter will explore how refugees and asylum seekers have met the criteria of the 'outsider' at various times and in various places throughout history. Where refugees perhaps have a 'social role' to play, some argue that the practice of asylum has been used a political tool.

The Concept and Practice of Asylum

The nation-state is neither a single unit, nor a 'passive receiver' of migrants. Instead, a nation-state exists as part of a wider system of states, and has an active role in stimulating and restricting both voluntary and forced migration (Joppke, 1999: 1-2). It is therefore important to theorise about the state and asylum as part of the connections and

relationships between states. An interesting discussion of how asylum is useful to the state is to be found in the work of Liza Schuster (2003). In her book *The Use and Abuse of Political Asylum*, she presents a theoretical analysis of the historical development of asylum as both a concept and a practice. She argues that the practice of granting asylum will emerge when certain conditions are in place, 'distinct jurisdictions' between states, a 'parity of power between different states or powers, and most importantly, an advantage to the wider society' of the receiving state (Schuster, 2003: 64).

Territorial asylum emerged originally in ancient Greece, where it was made possible by the separate jurisdictions of the city-states, and the parity of power between them. The practice of territorial asylum in Europe however, disappeared after the fall of Greek civilisation, and did not emerge again until the reign of Henry VIII in Britain. During his time in power the Church and the state became separate entities, and England became an autonomous sovereign state. Territorial asylum became possible, for the necessary conditions came into being. From the sixteenth to the end of the eighteenth century, Britain continued to grant asylum to refugees, and usually refused to extradite 'political criminals'. Receiving political refugees came to be looked upon as an act of hostility by pursuing states, a 'source of irritation'. Granting asylum was considered as a way of affirming sovereignty, asserting the power of the state over those within its borders, whilst at the same time it undermined the sovereignty of the prosecuting state. In this way, Schuster offers an understanding of asylum as a 'tool of the state' (2003: 76).

With the continuing development of modernity, the nation-state entered a new phase, in which the notion of liberalism was added to its definition. With regards to asylum this

meant that allowing entry to refugees did not only reinforce the sovereignty of the host state; granting asylum to *political* refugees, especially those seeking refuge because of their political stance, meant that granting asylum could now reinforce the legitimacy of the ideology of liberal democratic nation-states (ibid: 77).

Political Instability and Limits to Asylum, 1880s – 1940

The liberal approach to the entry of *aliens* that had characterized the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries changed from the 1880s onwards. Economic crisis hit Britain hard with high levels of unemployment, as the Industrial Revolution came to a virtual halt. At the same time, the pogroms of Jewish people in Russia and Eastern Europe urged many to flee their homelands, and come to Britain (or move on to the US). As a result of these changes, intolerance and anti-Semitism gained the upper hand in shaping both public opinion and political responses, and Britain's liberal attitude to immigration changed to one of regulating the flow of immigrants (Schuster, 2003: 81-82).

This resulted in the Aliens Act of 1905, which gave the government the right to deny entry to 'undesirable aliens'. 'Undesirable' meant anyone who could not support themselves, who suffered mental health problems, or who had committed a crime in their own country. Although the Act did not mention the terms 'refugee' or 'asylum', those aliens seeking refuge from persecution on political or religious grounds would be allowed entry under the Act. Although its impact was quite limited, it did have an important 'symbolic value' in its relation to immigration into Britain (Knox and Kushner, 1999: 28-29), since it established a standard which justified all subsequent asylum and immigration policies (Cohen, 2006: 58).

Hostility against Germans, and a general sense of insecurity with regards to Europe in the run-up to the First World War, provided the grounds for the Aliens Restrictions Act of 1914. The government could now exercise complete control over who entered Britain. After the war, both the 1919 Aliens Restriction (Amendment) Act and the 1920 Aliens Order continued to introduce ever tighter measures (Bloch, 2002: 26-27)

This period came to be characterized by a greater control of migratory movement, not least by the introduction of the passport. However, the increase in the number of refugees in Europe, such as Russians fleeing the Revolution, and Armenians fleeing Turkey, made the situation untenable, and the international community created an agency to take responsibility for them, the League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (LNHCR). The LNHCR was to provide humanitarian assistance to refugees. It was however given very little money, and even less power, because its interests always remained of lesser importance than the interests of the League of Nations' member states. Therefore, when the rise of fascism in the 1930s generated even more refugees, it was difficult to find states that would accept them (Schuster, 2003: 86-88).

The LNHCR did however form the beginning of what was to become a series of international regimes that would regulate refugees, and define them as a category, thereby producing knowledge about refugees as problems, whilst never problematizing the state system. Contrary to popular belief, Britain's attitude towards refugees did not change in the 1930s, or even during the Second World War. Feelings of anti-semitism and fascism were on the rise in Britain as well as in Europe, which gave the government grounds for justifying its restrictive response to refugees fleeing Nazism (Bloch, 2002: 28-29), and

this era was characterized by the emergence of international organisations and national policies that arose out of a statist attitude towards refugees. It also prepared the ground for continuing in this manner after the Second World War.

Refugees as Problems and Policy Responses

As the Second World War came to an end in 1945, the Allied Forces were confronted with some urgent matters. Firstly, the war itself had left Europe in ruins, and displaced millions of people. Secondly, this situation enabled a conflict of political and economic ideology, which had dominated political debates for decades before the war, to result in the beginning of the Cold War. The re-drawing of borders against the background of the Cold War meant that many Displaced Persons (DPs) could not or would not return home.

The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA) was set up in 1943 to provide assistance to displaced people in the parts of Europe that had suffered German occupation (Soguk, 1999: 154). It was hoped that UNRRA would tackle the ‘problem’ swiftly. Initially, its efforts to repatriate DPs worked quite well. During May and June of 1945, 5.25 million people were sent home, primarily to countries in Western and Northern Europe. By September most Italian and Yugoslav DPs had been sent home too. The two million that were still in the Western parts of Germany after this time, were not so easy to repatriate. They were mainly Eastern Europeans, Poles, Ukrainians and people from Baltic states, and many of these did not want to return home (Ekstein, 1999: 140).

Both the Allied Forces and the Soviet government had little sympathy for those that were left in the rubble of Germany. Stalin’s government considered Russian PoW’s as traitors, and forced labourers, it was argued, should not have worked for the enemy, they were

seen as ‘collaborators and war criminals’, and they should upon their return ‘be sent to the gulag’. Modris Ekstein, a Canadian historian of Latvian origin, spent his early childhood years in a DP camp with his family, and he recalls this time as characterised by fear and uncertainty, ‘we were terrified of repatriation’ (1999: 140).

Governments of Allied Forces preferred to use the term ‘displaced person’, rather than the term ‘refugee’, because to name them refugees might indicate that they would have to accept that the displaced had no homelands to return to (Knox and Kushner, 1999: 217). Furthermore, it enabled them to recruit DPs as labourers, and to control the conditions under which the DPs would be allowed entry. From the early origins of ‘international refugee regimes’, governments knew how to categorise the uprooted and exiled in ways that would be most beneficial to their states. Labeling them as displaced rather than as refugees, they had the power to select exactly who would go where and what they would be doing.

Countries such as Sweden, Britain, Canada, Australia, and Argentina sent officials from their Departments of Labour to recruit workers from the DP camps. They were to be employed in mines, forests, or domestic services (Ekstein, 1999: 137). They preferred young, healthy, unskilled workers to the more educated people, which made the situation difficult for many DPs, including Ekstein’s family, ‘my father, born in 1899, a minister of religion, and student of classics, lost out on all counts. He was too old, and too intellectual’ (ibid: 102).

However, if, as in the case of the Polish DPs, a home country became a Communist state as a result of the Cold War, the situation changed. In the DP camps, Poles ‘received

special attention', they came to be seen as refugees from Communism, rather than DPs (ibid: 218). The idea of 'asylum as a tool of the state' is relevant to refugees from Communist states. They were welcomed in the West, because their plight legitimised and reinforced Western ideology.

The situation in Europe, as described above, in combination with some other contributing factors, became the basis for what Soguk (1999) names 'international refugee regimes'. The first factor that shaped international responses was that refugees, as casualties of the state system were seen as the problem, never the state system itself. Organisations such as UNRRA and UNHCR, arose as a response to refugees as problems, thereby generating more knowledge about refugees as problems, whilst leaving the citizen/nation/state hierarchy intact (Soguk, 1999).

Secondly, the Soviet Union was not included in drawing up the 1951 Convention, and it tended towards protecting those who left their (communist) countries because of holding Western ideological views. Finally, within the state system, the 'problem' of a large number of displaced people was considered temporary, and an exception, it was seen as a problem that could be fixed. This kind of thinking fitted the framework of the state system, and the idea of sedentariness. The notion of the 'problem' as temporary was evident in the expectation that the UNHCR would finish its work by 1953 (Schuster, 2003: 100-101).

For Soguk, the emergence of the UNHCR did not bring an entirely new response to the 'refugee problem' as a humanitarian crisis. Instead he argues that a statist definition of the refugee had been developing since the setting up of the UNHCR in 1921. Between

1921 and 1951 the refugee became an institutionalised category, a permanent ‘refugee field as a field of statecraft’. He describes this process as:

[A] multitude of discursive and non-discursive practices (that) went into the fashioning and refashioning of the refugee field as a field of statecraft. Of all these practices, however, the generation of intergovernmental arrangements, agreements, conventions, and protocols was the most effective. These intergovernmental instruments worked to condition the politico-administrative and socio-economic environment of human displacement by defining the “true” refugee and by infusing into the refugee category a program of rights and privileges, as well as duties and responsibilities, through the play of inclusion and exclusion (1999: 163).

The ‘refugee field’ as a field of ‘statecraft’ began to define the ‘true’ refugee, and it is at this point that the criteria for who will be considered for refugee status, or, whose individual life stories will match the structural requirements of the asylum and immigration policies of receiving countries, started to emerge. Moreover, the ‘refugee field’ reinforced the ‘citizen/nation/state’ hierarchy, and so shaped the perception that inhabitants of Western states have, not only of refugees, but also of themselves as citizens, and their place in the state system. Soguk tells us that international regimes such as the UNHCR are:

[I]mbricated in all aspects of our lives; they become instrumental to the articulation and rearticulation of a number of state-oriented notions and projects around which we organise our lives. These notions and practices range from democratic projects, to issues of national and international security, to human rights – the stability and welfare of the society in which we live. In all of them, refugee regimentations filter refugee images and identities. Refugees may enter our personal and collective field of vision day in and day out, but we hardly ever see them other than through spectacles paradigmatically productive of statist ends and beginnings (Soguk, 1999: 178).

From its origins, discussions of ‘who is a refugee’ were situated in, and confirming of a statist paradigm, which continuously shaded how members of host populations would

think about them. Since citizens of Western states see refugees through ‘spectacles paradigmatically productive of statist ends and beginnings’ (Soguk, 1999: 178), most will be blind to the realities of refugee experiences from the perspective of the refugee, and deaf to the personal stories of refugee lives, as told by refugees themselves.

To sum up, the idea of refugees as problems was reinforced by the international coordination that arose in response to the DPs who were found in the remnants of Europe. It was also shaped by a statist ideology, and determined by the emerging Cold War. The definition of a ‘refugee’ was mostly created with the person fleeing communist states in mind. Since then it has been extremely difficult for many refugees to meet the criteria of the 1951 Convention. One group who was definitely neglected in its formulation was refugee women.

Gender and Asylum

Since the inception of the international legislative framework for refugees, the plight of refugee women has been marginalized. Under the current interpretation of the 1951 Refugee Convention, and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees it is particularly complicated for refugee women to claim asylum on the basis of a ‘well founded fear of persecution’ (Crawley, 2001: 4). Until the 1980’s, the experiences of women were for the most part neglected within the refugee regime. Although the procedure of claiming asylum is seemingly ‘gender neutral’, it is more difficult for women to claim refugee status in their own right (Kofman et al, 2000: 73).

The persecution of women is often not considered ‘political’, which implies that they are not in need of international protection. This is linked to international human rights

discourses, which uphold the public-private dichotomy. Persecution for reasons of male 'public' activities is more easily recognized than persecution for female 'private' activities, which resonates in refugee and asylum law, where the focus is mainly on political rights and which fails to acknowledge social and economic rights. As a result, gender bias is present in the criteria of who will be defined as a refugee, and in the way that individual states interpret the Convention (Crawley, 2001: 4).

The marginalization of women's experiences is evident in the fact that refugee women find it difficult to demonstrate that they suffer persecution, since it occurs in the home or community, and often, 'what appears to be non-political activity by women may on more careful inspection turn out to be a form of political protest or activism'. Furthermore, lack of recognizing as women as refugees has led to barriers to asylum procedures and gathering of evidence (Crawley, 2001: 5). Women experience limited access to the asylum application process, and often have to claim as a dependant of their husband. In 2003 69% of women who claimed asylum did so as dependants of their husbands (Ceneda, 2003). The needs of women who claim for asylum as dependants are frequently overlooked, and may be disregarded or unnoticed in comparison to the situation of their male counterparts, who have often suffered violent persecution and imprisonment (Kofman et al, 2000:73).

Other concerns that influence the low recognition of female applicants include the issue that when women depend on the asylum claim of male relatives, they have less chance of explaining their motivation for claiming asylum in detail. In addition, the lack of female interviewers discourages women to share experiences of gender-specific persecution, and

often the lack of information on gender issues in the country of origin leads to poor decision making. Finally, when women claim as principal applicant, they often do so after having been a dependant in the initial claim, and they are then penalized for not having applied at port upon arrival (Kofman et al, 2005: 29).

As principal applicants women have more chance of their claim being accepted on the basis of political opinion, gender specific persecution (such as female genital mutilation), or indirect persecution, which means that women are persecuted because of the political activities of a family member (Kofman et al, 2005: 28). It is not unusual for persecution of women to occur in the form of sexual violence, which is often used by persecutors as a state strategy to dehumanize women, and so destabilize whole communities. At times such violence has been interpreted as the impulsive actions by military or police officers towards women who just happen to be there (Crawley, 2001: 44). This reflects the wider problem of the complexity of interpreting cases of sexual violence towards women within the 1951 Refugee Convention, which does not recognise persecution on grounds of sex, and does not recognise women as a ‘particular social group’ (Kofman et al, 2000: 75).

Bemma Donkoh, the UNHCR representative in the UK (2005)²⁵ stated that many women flee for the same reasons as men, but that it is vital to understand that many societies continue to be of patriarchal nature, and that very often the ‘attributes of men, political or otherwise, will be imputed to their wives, sisters, etc. by both state and non-state agents’. Often women who suffer gender-specific forms of persecution, such as sexual violence, domestic violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation, even forced abortion or

²⁵ Bemma Donkoh presented ‘The International Context’ at the Seminar *Why Women Flee: Persecution against Women*, held during Refugee Week June 2005 in London

sterilization, find it difficult to seek protection under the Geneva Convention. Donkoh (2005) continues to explain this occurs because:

[o]f definitions of what constitutes the public and private spheres, and because very often the perpetrators of violence against women are non-state agents (e.g. spouses) or are perceived as being so (e.g. members of the security forces acting without authority: the ‘rogue element’ argument); (ibid)

Sexual violence often conceals the difficult relationship between persecution and Refugee Convention grounds, and women who have suffered sexual violence often find that their experiences are not understood as linked to ‘religion, race, nationality, political opinion or a particular social group’, but as ‘random expressions of individual sexual violence’ (Crawley, 2001: 62). The offer of temporary leave exemplifies the fact that women are often considered ‘passive victims’, who are to be granted leave on humanitarian grounds, and not granted asylum as a political right (Schuster, 2003: 245).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s there has been a gradual acknowledgement of gender persecution within refugee law in Europe, and in most EU countries Gender Guidelines have been adopted (Kofman, 2005: 29). In Britain, the Home Office introduced the *Gender Issues in the Asylum Claim* in 2004 (Refugee Women Resource Project, 2005), which includes Gender Guidelines on matters such as caseworkers need to take gender issues into account when evaluating claims, the need for female interviewers, and it emphasizes that country of origin information that is relevant to women’s claims must be considered (RWRP, 2005).

Although there have been some improvements, there are still many practices that remain problematic. Many of the EU member still do not recognise sexual violence as a form of persecution, there remains a lack of female interviewers in all of the EU countries, including Britain, reports on country of origin information regarding gender still lacks detail, and finally, there remains serious inconsistency between countries on gender issues in asylum claims. For example, in France sexual violence, especially female genital mutilation is recognised in the appeals procedure, whereas in Sweden such cases cannot be granted refugee status (RWRP, 2005).

Ceneda (2003: 166-167) argues that despite the introduction of gender guidelines there remains a lack of awareness about gender issues in the asylum procedure, and as long as the '*culture of disbelief*' (ibid) remains unchallenged, decisions to refuse women asylum seekers protection will continue to be made on the basis of a 'gender-blind approach to their claim' (Ceneda, 2003: 166-167).

Britain and Immigration 1945 – 1980s

Whilst international 'refugee regimes' emerged in response to Europe's DPs, Britain's reaction to the situation in Europe immediately after the Second World War was to send officials from the Ministry of Labour to the DP camps on the European mainland. After the war Britain experienced immediate labour shortages, and some of the DPs could be used to lessen this scarcity. The government operated several schemes to recruit DPs from 1946 onwards. First the Displaced Workers Scheme, under which 1,000 women from the Baltic States came. Other schemes included Balt Cygnet and Westward Ho!,

under which approximately 90,000 people were allowed entry (Bloch, 2002: 29-30; Solomos, 2003: 50-51; see also Kay and Miles, 1992).

The European Volunteer Worker (EVW) Scheme came into existence in 1949, and it is argued that during the late 1940s approximately 85,000 EVWs entered Britain, originating from countries such as the Baltic states, Yugoslavia, and Ukraine. This decade witnessed also the arrival of 127,900 Polish people, plus 29,400 Polish EVWs. From the moment of arrival immigrants were given employment, which they needed to maintain in order to stay in Britain. The government could exercise a high level of control over this group of immigrants, and EVWs were considered as labour migrants rather than as refugees (Bloch, 2002: 29-30; Solomos, 2003: 50-51; see also Kay and Miles, 1992).

Whilst Britain was allowing entry to EVWs in its controlled manner, 400 people arrived from the Caribbean on the SS Empire Windrush in 1948, and between 70,000 and 100,000 people came from Ireland between 1945 and 1951. For the next few decades, immigration debates did not mention refugees. Instead they focused on the impact of 'coloured' immigrants from the Commonwealth countries, who were 'British subjects', and under the 1948 British Nationality Act had a right to free entry and settlement. During the 1950s, debates emerged that described a relationship between immigration and the 'colour problem' in society in relation to housing, employment, and crime. These debates formed the basis for both immigration control and the Race Relations Acts. Immigration legislation during the 1960s and 1970s was very much targeted towards restricting the entry of 'coloured' immigrants from the Commonwealth countries, and not

only operated to 'racialise' and 'institutionalise' immigration control, but also influenced public debates on immigration from the 1950s to the present day (Solomos, 2003: 50-57).

There were some groups of refugees that entered Britain during the 1960s and 1970s. Bloch (2002: 35-36) explains how they were mainly dealt with as 'programme refugees', which meant that the government could exercise a high level of control over how many refugees were allowed entry, and where they would settle. Although there was some assistance for them in settlement, this was mainly provided by the voluntary sector. Refugees that fall within the 'programme refugees' category were East African Asians in 1972-3, mainly from Uganda, where they were expelled by Idi Amin. Other groups included 3,000 people from Chile in 1973, 19,000 from Vietnam, Lao, and Cambodia between 1975 and 1990, and 10,000 Greek Cypriots in 1974. Part of the programme was to disperse arrivals around the country, mostly to where there was available housing. Little attention was given to the enabling of economic settlement, which led to both social and economic isolation, and many refugees, after dispersal, moved back to more urban areas (Bloch, 2002: 35-36).

Global Developments and a Changing Paradigm of Asylum

The quite moderate attitude in policy making for refugees in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s, reflects a similar mood in Europe, where following the immediate postwar period the approach towards asylum policy has been described as one of 'uncoordinated liberalism' (Joly, 1996; see also Levy, 1999). Changes in these liberal attitudes towards refugees in Europe occurred as part of political, economic and social developments world-wide. Global developments in the late 1980s, such as the end of the Cold War and

the opening up of Eastern Europe, together with the impact of global economics led to ‘new forms of political crises’ such as the political conflicts that involved ‘ethnic cleansing’ in former Yugoslavia and Africa (Papastergiadis, 2000: 38). The conflicts provoked by these political, economic, and social developments, caused millions of people in the Middle East, Asia, the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, and in parts of Africa to be displaced.

Jeff Crisp (2003) suggests that the newly emerging paradigm is rooted in the idea that the movements of refugees and asylum seekers can be efficiently ‘managed’ and ‘controlled’. He also argues that the challenge to the practice of asylum is not new. European governments were already debating the restriction of entry in the early 1980s, and some African countries were already forcing refugees to return to countries where they would face persecution, prior to the large increases in refugee numbers world-wide. However, despite the argument that there was never a ‘golden age of asylum’, and that there was always a challenge to asylum, in the last two decades many states have devised strategies to virtually close their borders to refugees, who are not offered the support that international refugee law enables them to claim (Crisp, 2003).

Asylum Policy in the European Union

The newly emerging global approach to refugees began to shape European political debates during the 1980s and 1990s, which have been branded as a time of ‘harmonised restrictionism’ (Joly, 1996; see also Levy, 1999: 22). Elements of current EU asylum policy can be found as early as the mid-seventies, when member states worked together in an attempt to control international terrorism through TREVI. Following this, the

Schengen Accords developed from 1985 to 1990, and focused on opening up borders between member states. It included plans for police and customs authorities to work together, and a system for sharing computerized personal information such as the Schengen Information System (SIS) and EURODAC (European Automated Fingerprinting Regulation System). Schengen came to be the model for future European asylum policy (Levy, 1999: 23).

The Dublin Convention (ratified in 1997) introduced the measure that the first EU country an asylum seeker would arrive in, should be responsible for processing their asylum claim. This Convention worked on the assumption that a claim for asylum in any EU country would have the same result, and it tried to ensure that asylum seekers could only apply for asylum once. However, asylum decision making procedures vary not only in different countries, where they are influenced by factors such as ‘diplomatic ties, imperial-colonial relations and trade links’ (Bloch, 2002: 57), they also vary in different situations, where they may be affected by issues such as gender, the emotional state of the applicant, attitude and skills of immigration officers, cultural concerns, and credibility of the applicant’s story as the basis for their asylum claim (these issues will be explored in chapter six).

The EU attempted to “coordinate visa policy, harmonise national entry procedures and policies towards the handling of manifestly unfounded or abusive requests for asylum, and promote the concept of the ‘safe third country’” (Levy, 1999: 31). However, the variation in responses to the Yugoslav crisis demonstrated it was still the governments of individual member states that effectively shaped policy for refugees and asylum seekers.

National policy making in the areas of deportation, work permits, appeals procedures, and welfare entitlements was still mainly controlled by individual member states. The Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 indicated a further move towards the integration of a European approach towards refugees and asylum seekers. It incorporated the measures for refugees and other forms of migrants of previous programmes, and made asylum policy gain a more important position in the EU, since it was moved from the ‘inter-governmental Third Pillar to the communitarian First Pillar of the EU’ (Bloch, 2002: 58).

Nevertheless, it was the EU summit in Tampere in 1999 that set the framework for a common asylum and immigration policy, which was supposed to be in place by 2004. Tampere promised to uphold the Geneva Convention, respect the right to seek asylum, and ensure the principle of *non-refoulement*. The Refugee Council²⁶ acknowledges there has been some progress in harmonizing EU asylum law and policy. However, there are still significant discrepancies in member states’ asylum policies and procedures. Areas of concern are the asylum decision making processes, reception, settlement and integration of refugees and asylum seekers in individual states, and the overall prevention of access to EU countries for refugees in need of protection (Refugee Council, 2006).

It seems that harmonisation is determined by minimum standards set so low that they barely meet international human rights law. For example, in terms of reception it allows detention and accommodation centers, and the withholding of education. Where asylum determination procedures are concerned, it has enabled governments to limit legal assistance and the fast-tracking of claims. At the same time, the EU has managed to

²⁶ The Refugee Council, the Scottish Refugee Council, and the Welsh Refugee Council submission: House of Commons Home Affairs Committee Inquiry on EU Issues (2006)

strengthen its border controls to the extent that it is now extremely difficult for those in need of protection to reach the countries where they have the opportunity to claim asylum. Many scholars argue that this is not harmonization, but a policy framework organised around the ‘lowest common denominator’ (Levy, 1999; Schuster, 2005), of which the human consequences have been discussed in the introduction to this study, and will be referred to in the conclusion to this chapter.

Asylum in Britain, a ‘Safe Haven’ Closes its Doors

Britain was affected by the global developments and imminent attitude changes towards refugees as all Western states were. Firstly, the number of refugees and asylum seekers increased dramatically, from approximately 4000 applications per annum throughout the 1980s, to 11640 in 1989, reaching 44840 claims in 1991. The numbers remained high throughout the 1990s, with 71160 applications in 1999, peaking at 84130 claims for asylum in 2002.²⁷ Secondly, the countries from which refugees fled, became much more diverse. Finally, where before some people entered as ‘programme refugees’, they now were ‘spontaneous asylum seekers’ (Bloch, 2002: 44), which meant that refugees did not enter and settle in Britain under a government controlled programme, but would cross the border and claim asylum of their own accord. The government in this case could exercise much less control over who came in and where they settled.

These changes gave rise to ferociously hostile discourses surrounding refugees and asylum seekers, by politicians, in the media, and amongst the public. A term that began to permeate asylum discourses during this time was ‘bogus refugee’, which was used to

²⁷ Sources: UNHCR and Home Office; Since this time numbers have been down, for example 33960 claims in 2004, which decreased again to 25715 in 2005.

mark a clear difference between a ‘genuine’ political refugee, and a ‘disguised economic migrant’ (Schuster and Solomos, 1999: 63). Since the main countries from which refugees came in the period 1992 – 2001 included former Yugoslavia, Romania, Turkey, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Iran, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, all of which had (some of these still have) well known political conflicts from which people flee (UNHCR, 2002), this seems a ‘mythical’ term. Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that there is no validity in the claim that the asylum system suffered widespread abuse, since the conflicts from which refugees fled, were in countries known for very high levels of human rights abuse (Gibney, 2002).

In spite of the desolate realities of refugee lives, the British government responded with a series of acts aimed at increasing border controls, restricting the right to welfare, and introducing the use of detention. It was hoped that these measures would work as a deterrent. The Immigration and Asylum Appeals Act of 1993 was the first legislation ever, to be directly aimed at asylum seekers. This legislation could be restrictive because since the end of the Cold War Western states no longer needed asylum as a ‘tool of the state’, Western capitalist ideology no longer needed to be emphasized and legitimated by allowing entry to refugees from communist states. As Schuster and Solomos (1999: 52) argue:

[T]he most important condition necessary for granting asylum is no longer in place in Britain: asylum no longer serves any obvious purpose for the state – it has no need for refugees (as source of labour or skills) and with the demise of the Soviet Union it is no longer needed to legitimate one ideology over another (ibid).

Although the debates leading up to the 1993 legislation were dominated by the idea of keeping out ‘bogus’ refugees, both politicians and the public wanted to hold on to the

idea of Britain as a ‘safe haven’ for those in ‘genuine’ need of protection, and they emphasize the consensus amongst politicians who:

[A]greed that the granting of asylum was the mark of a civilised and liberal state and that Britain had certain legal and humanitarian obligations (ibid).

However, as British asylum policy developed during the 1990s, the idea of Britain as a ‘safe haven’ became quite empty of meaning, a statement often used, but without substance, since Britain has become a country whose borders are very difficult to cross, and those asylum seekers that do manage to enter, face application procedures that are unfair, living conditions that are extremely harsh, and most have little to expect in the form of Leave to Remain.²⁸

The main aims of the 1993 Act were to restrict the entry of asylum seekers, to speed up the asylum application process, and to make settlement more difficult. It introduced measures such as fingerprinting, and the ‘safe third country rule’, which meant that claimants could be sent back to a safe third country if they had passed through this country prior to arriving in the UK. The Act also reduced asylum seekers’ rights to housing (Bloch, 2002: 48).

The Asylum and Immigration Act of 1996 continued in a similar fashion. It made the distinction between ‘bogus’ and ‘genuine’ refugee explicit. Those who applied at port of entry were considered ‘genuine’, while those who applied in-country were considered ‘bogus’. Asylum seekers who applied in-country had no more entitlement to social

²⁸ In 2006 for example 23610 applications were made, and 20930 initial decisions. Of these decisions 79% were refusals, compared to 23430 applications in 2007, and 21775 initial decisions, of which 74% were refusals (Source: Home Office, 2008)

security benefits, whilst those considered ‘genuine’ were still entitled to 90% of benefit income (Bloch, 2002: 48-50).

The ‘White List’, a list of countries that were considered ‘safe’ was introduced, which meant that applicants from countries on this list could be ‘fast-tracked’ through the asylum procedure, including the appeals process, since their claims were usually considered to be unfounded. The ‘fast track appeals procedure’ was meant for claimants from countries on the White List, arrivals without valid identity documents, applications which were deemed not to fit the criteria of the 1951 UN Convention, applications made after claimants had been given a deportation or removal order, and ‘fraudulent’ applications. In addition, the time scale for dealing with appeals from these types of claimants, or for applicants ‘who lacked credibility’ became much tighter, and the ability of asylum seekers to appeal against a negative decision on their claim for any of the above reasons, was severely reduced (IPPR, 2003: 38-42). Other measures meant that asylum seekers lost their right to housing, and were often placed in temporary accommodation, such as hostels, or B&Bs, which led directly to higher levels of social exclusion and made integration even more difficult (Bloch, 2002: 48-50).

New Labour: Swifter Decisions – Faster Removal²⁹

When the Labour government came into power in 1997 one would have hoped to see a more gentle approach towards asylum seekers. It was not to be so. Their first legislation in 1999, introduced the National Asylum Support Service, NASS, which became responsible for all social security provision for asylum seekers, separating them entirely

²⁹ Home Office (2006) *New Asylum Model: Swifter Decisions – Faster Removal* Home Office Press
Release 18 January 2006

from mainstream society. It also brought (the now abolished) voucher system, and the policy of dispersal, to lighten the burden of the London local authorities (Bloch, 2002: 50-51).

Although this Act abolished the ‘White List’, it introduced several harsh measures that established a strategy which empowered authorities to detain, remove, or return claimants more easily. These regulations included a ‘safe third country’ list, which included all EU countries, Canada, the USA, Switzerland, and Norway. Under this rule, claimants who had traveled to the UK through any of the countries on this list, could no longer dispute decisions to be removed to that country. Some important changes in the system of asylum appeals meant that any person who alleged that a decision on their case was in breach of the obligations of the UK under the European Convention of Human Rights, would have a right of appeal. However, under the 1999 Act, where the Secretary of State could demonstrate that an asylum claim had been made merely to hinder removal from the UK, the right of appeal was ended (IPPR, 2003: 40).

These changes, combined with the setting up of ‘fast track schemes’ to process asylum applications such as Oakington, and the new power given to the Government to prepare ‘removal directions’ and ‘deportation orders’ prior to the decision on a claim, indicate that the Government came to be in a much better position to control the asylum procedure, and the lives of asylum seekers during their claim for asylum, whilst increasing the ability to remove and deport people once they had been refused. Furthermore, the ‘fast tracking’ of asylum claims, and changing the rights to appeal also created the idea of the ‘one stop appeal’, where asylum seekers would have one chance to

raise all asylum, human rights and humanitarian issues pertaining to their case (IPPR, 2003: 40-41).

In 2002, the Labour government continued its restrictive approach with the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act (Home Office, 2002). This Act suggested a 'managed process of induction', as well as 'accommodation, reporting, and removal centers', which offer asylum seekers full board and some language courses and other training. Children were to be educated in the centre. These centers were similar to reception centers, but more restrictive. It also implemented a fast-tracking of claims and appeals, an increase in border controls, and it reintroduced the White List that had been used in 1996. Thus, the government legitimated refusing asylum claims from countries on this List, on the basis of being unfounded, which tightened the criteria for who will be considered a 'genuine' refugee. Applicants from such countries still had the right to appeal, but only after having been removed (IPPR, 2003: 39-41).

The overall purpose of New Labour's asylum and immigration legislation and policy started to emerge. Firstly, the setting up of a network of induction, accommodation and removal centers to deal with asylum applications made the asylum process an 'end to end' system. Secondly, the government tried to create a tough system of immigration controls to reduce 'abuse' of the system (IPPR, 2003: 39). Finally, regulations in the asylum determination procedure such as the 'third country rule', and the 'White List' enable the authorities to question the credibility of claimants even before their case had been given due attention. Such measures made the criteria for who would be considered a 'genuine' refugee more and more difficult to meet. In addition, those whose claims were

refused on the basis of these rules, had their access to the appeals system severely reduced. At the same time, ‘managing’ claimants in accommodation, reception and removal centers ensured that people could be removed quite swiftly once their claim had been refused.

Making ‘Credibility’ a Legal Requirement

The Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants) Act 2004 enabled the government to withdraw support from unsuccessful asylum-seeking families with dependant children, made significant changes to the appeal system, and introduced the electronic monitoring of those claimants subject to immigration control. Significantly, this Act made the question of ‘credibility’ of the refugee an explicit legal issue. Under Section 2 it is a criminal offence for asylum seekers not to have a valid identity document with them as they apply for asylum, unless they can offer a credible explanation. The penalty for this ‘offence’ has been set as a prison sentence of up to two years. Decisions to prosecute are based on what asylum applicants say during their initial screening interview (Home Office, 2004).

This section works in collaboration with Section 8, the ‘credibility of asylum applicants’, which stipulates that a claimant may damage their credibility if they behave in a way that ‘is designed or likely to conceal information, is designed or likely to mislead, or is designed or likely to obstruct or delay the handling or resolution of the claim or the taking of a decision in relation to the claimant’ (Home Office, 2004). A person is considered not credible if they do not show a valid passport on request, when they use a false document, when they destroy their identity and travel documents without good

reason, when they fail to answer questions in the screening interview, or if they did not apply for asylum in a safe third country.

In effect, these regulations enabled the Home Office to make asylum decisions based on ‘how people came to the UK rather than on the merits of an individual case’, when the 1951 Convention clearly states that an ‘asylum seeker should not be penalised for how they traveled to or entered a country’ (Refugee Council, 2005). Furthermore, severely traumatised people, including victims of torture and rape, usually find it quite difficult to disclose their experiences, and especially upon arrival are often not in a state that is sufficiently coherent to cope with immigration procedures (on this please see chapter six).

Asylum and immigration legislation of the last two decades clearly displays the symptoms of the ‘processes of statecraft’ (Soguk, 1999), which have established a severely restrictive asylum paradigm, and created a policy framework that is not only designed to deter asylum applicants, restrict entry to the UK, and make access to public services more difficult, but also to speed up the asylum application process. With the empowerment of authorities to detain, remove, and return claimants, reductions in the right to appeal, combined with the setting up of ‘fast track schemes’ to process asylum applications, the British government came to be in a much better position to control the asylum procedure, and the lives of asylum seekers during their claim for asylum, whilst increasing the ability to remove and deport people once they had been refused.

The measures implemented through the 2002 Act, and the specific requirement in the 2004 Act of ‘credibility’ as a criterion by which asylum claims will be determined, made

sure that *more asylum seekers would be unsuccessful*, and that they *would be removed more effectively*. Since the criteria for who will be granted Leave to Remain have become more rigid, and claimants only have one opportunity to make their case, the clarity in the telling of the personal refugee story during the asylum application process has become extremely important.

The Asylum Application Process

The asylum seeking process is the means by which a receiving state decides whether a person claiming asylum had sufficient reason to leave the protection of their own state, and subsequently, whether this person is ‘deserving’ of protection by the state in the country of arrival. It is during this process that refugees *have to tell their stories*, which need to be ‘credible’ and ‘verifiable’, preferably accompanied by evidence, such as documents or medical reports. It is during this process that the subjective experiences of the individual refugee are no longer individual, but come to be documented and objectified. Here, the personal refugee story cannot be told freely, because the criteria that the story needs to meet are already in place, since the procedure for asylum claims has developed within the contours of a rigid policy framework. It is not surprising therefore that in recent years the procedure has become streamlined into an ‘obstacle course’ (Amnesty International, 2004), through which applications are decided on as soon as reasonably possible.³⁰

³⁰ This procedure has since the implementation of the New Asylum Model (May 2005, see below) changed considerably, however, the asylum claims of the participants in this study have mainly been processed under the application procedure as described here.

The first obstacle is the *initial application*, which is usually where the *screening interview* takes place. This is followed by the more formal *asylum interview*, where the claimant's story is scrutinized and examined within both the British policy framework, and against the 1951 Refugee Convention definition. Here, the subjective experiences of the individual refugee life story encounter the objectifying requirements of asylum policy as a structural process.

Initial Application

Upon arrival a claim for asylum can be made either at port, which means to an immigration officer at an airport or a seaport, or in-country, which means the claim is made at the nearest Immigration and Nationality Directorate office (Croydon or Liverpool). Current government policy (in various guises since the 1996 Act) strongly encourages asylum seekers to apply at port rather than in-country, which diminishes their chances of having any legal advice. This may have some serious consequences later on during the asylum determination procedure (Home Office, 2005). For example, some claimants may have more chance of legal entry to the UK in another capacity (ILPA, 2004: 18). Furthermore, asylum seekers during the initial application need to complete some forms (see below), and are required to start disclosing information about their situation. It is extremely important for their stories to be coherent at all times during the procedure. Telling their story without legal advice in such stressful circumstances, may make their story seem less credible later on, because initially they do not grasp the kind of criteria that the story needs to meet.

Olga Jubany-Baucells (2003; unpublished thesis) carried out a study into how refugee stories are socially constructed during the application and interviewing process. She demonstrates how narratives are shaped by both structural processes that require stories to answer a certain logic or rationality, and by a culture that assumes asylum seekers to be untrustworthy and ‘bogus’ from the onset. Immigration officers are trained and work within this subculture, in which they learn to be ‘investigators starting from a perspective of suspicion and disbelief’ (ibid: 115), who adopt and use interviewing skills that suit this perspective. The officer works on a basis of mistrust, and his or her main task is to test whether the asylum seeker is telling the truth.

Screening Interview

As part of the claim for asylum, a refugee is required to undergo a ‘screening interview’ at the Asylum Screening Unit (ASU). During this process, the authorities will check whether the claimant carries a valid identity document with their name and nationality on it, and they will be given an Application Registration Card (ARC), which has their personal details, photo and fingerprints on it, the purpose of which is to show their status as an asylum seeker in the UK. The immigration officer may decide to ‘fast track’ a claim, in which case the claimant may be moved to an accommodation or detention centre (Refugee Council, 2005).

In the interview, applicants need to complete the *Screening Form Level 1*, in which they give personal details, passport details, information about dependants, information about the journey (this may include questions about meals provided on the plane or describing certain features of the lorry). Details are also required about family, education history,

and immigration history. One aim of the screening process is to recognize those asylum seekers who can be removed to another country under the 'safe third country' rule (ILPA, 2004: 21).

A second form, *Screening Form Level 2*, enables the authorities to establish whether a person is eligible for support and accommodation from NASS. The questions on this form should be only about identity, status, and travel route to the UK. However, since the Secretary of State has the power to refuse an asylum application, which would then be considered not to have been made, s/he needs to be satisfied that asylum seekers have given accurate information. Therefore, interviewing officers are encouraged to ask questions about the reasons for the claim for asylum, as this can be relevant to whether a person should receive NASS support. Even if exclusion from the asylum application procedure would be in breach of the ECHR, the claimant still has no right of appeal, other than through judicial review. If later on in the procedure, there are inconsistencies between issues discussed at this interview, and at any later stage of the process, this will often be used by the Home Office to challenge the refugee's credibility (ILPA, 2004: 21-22).

When a person claims asylum at port, the application is characterised by a lack of preparation, both by the officer and by the applicant. The asylum seeker does not know which information the officer needs, '...they emphasize what they think is important, and leave out details that would benefit their application. They may not mention religious or political persecution, but focus instead on the war and poverty in their country, which does not help their case'. Lack of preparation by the immigration officer means that

sometimes the information of the sending country they have is out of date (Jubany-Baucells, 2003: 158). The asylum seeker's story during the interview is shaped by factors such as their emotional state, mistrust of 'figures of authority', and lack of information and preparation. The refugee is telling of their experiences, whilst the officer starts with an attitude of suspicion, and seeks rational answers to rational questions. It is not surprising that there often is a mismatch between questions and answers.

If at the end of the screening process a person's claim is accepted, either they will be given a 'Grant Letter', which they need to gain access to accommodation and should be attached to the NASS form, or the Home Office may fast-track the claims of asylum seekers from specific countries, where the Home Office believes the case can be dealt with quickly. In the 'Oakington fast track process', the application, including interview and decision can be done in seven to ten days. If a claim is refused, the claimant may appeal, and most people by this time will be released. The 'Harmondsworth' or 'super fast track process', is designed for asylum claimants from another set of countries. Applications under this rule are decided within five days, and appeal will be heard very quickly (ILPA, 2004: 22).

Asylum Interview

If a person is not in a fast track programme, they will at some point be invited to attend a longer, more in-depth interview. Before the interview applicants are required to complete the Statement of Evidence form (SEF), in which the 'case' for asylum needs to be put in writing. At this stage, asylum seekers are definitely in need of legal assistance, since the SEF is a highly complex form, and it needs to be accompanied by any evidence or

information that may support the claim. Any documentation that relates to why a person is claiming asylum, such as medical notes, qualifications, newspaper reports about the situation in the home country, and so forth. It is extremely important that the refugee story is cohesive and consistent. Any contradictory statements or information which makes the story seem not credible, may put the claim at risk of being refused. It is not always the case that a legal representative is present at this interview (Refugee Council, 2005).

Leave to Remain or Refusal

Once a claim has been decided, the claimant will be informed of the status that has been given. In Britain there are currently three forms of *Leave to Remain* that can be granted, Refugee Status, Humanitarian Protection, and Discretionary Leave. Refugee Status is for those asylum seekers whose claims have met the criteria set out in the Refugee Convention. Prior to 30 August 2005, those who were granted refugee status were automatically given *Indefinite Leave to Remain*. Since this date the Home Office has changed its approach to one of Temporary Protection, and refugee status is now granted for five years, after which the case will be reviewed.

Those claimants who are not recognised as refugees under the Refugee Convention, but who are at risk of persecution if returned to their country of origin, are granted Humanitarian Protection (HP), for five years. In particular cases (for example unaccompanied minors) the government can grant Discretionary Leave (DL), which is given outside the Immigration Rules. Claimants can be given up to three years leave. HP and DL are given in lieu of what used to be Exceptional Leave to Remain (ELR). ELR

could in the past be given on a temporary basis, where a claimant's case could be reviewed after six months, or a year. If a case has been refused, the claimant will be considered a *failed asylum seeker*. The government seeks to remove refused claimants through detaining more refugees whose claims are deemed unfounded from the onset, through increasing control over applicants by increasing detention capacity, and through the use of electronic tagging.

Situation at Present

As part of the government's *Five year strategy for immigration and asylum* (2005), the Home Office has developed a New Asylum Model (NAM). Since May 2005 the asylum application and decision making procedure has been changing into an even tighter procedure, which aims to process claims more rapidly, manage it more rigidly, leading to either integration when an applicant is granted Leave to Remain, or successful removal of those whose applications are refused. The key changes in the asylum procedure under the NAM are in the areas of segmentation, case ownership, and speed of processing.

Segmentation occurs at the time of initial application, and involves the classification of cases in terms of their essential features. It will determine how a case is processed and managed, and what will happen to the applicant during the asylum procedure. According to the segment their case is in, claimants may be removed, detained, put in accommodation close to a reporting centre, or be subjected to electronic monitoring (by voice recognition or tagging). It also affects access to legal advice and the speed of the asylum procedure. Furthermore, segmentation is based on the assumption that the outcome of a claim can be judged before the claim has even been processed. Through

segmentation, the authorities may be in a position to remove asylum seekers before giving their claims due consideration.

This criticism links in well with Schuster's (2005: 18) argument that driving the newly emerged asylum paradigm is the objective of EU states to remove asylum seekers without even assessing their claim to asylum. Other criticisms of the NAM include firstly, that the fast tracking of claims, and deciding on them in 11 days is hard for those asylum seekers who upon arrival are quite disorientated.³¹ This impairs the proper investigation of all relevant aspects of the claim, both for case owners and for lawyers, who hardly have the time to obtain evidence and prepare the client's case. Secondly, the Statement of Evidence Form (SEF) is no longer being used, yet it was the only instrument available for the claimant to prepare their story and reflect on it. With the discontinuation of the SEF, claimants have lost any opportunity to think about their experiences in relation to the asylum procedure, and there is no guarantee that they have had legal assistance before their asylum interview.

In addition, the government body responsible for asylum issues, the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND), has been replaced by the Border and Immigration Agency (BIA), a new agency of the Home Office. Service provision such as housing and benefits is no longer managed by NASS, but has been transferred to the BIA. With a single agency responsible for processing asylum claims, and accommodation and other services, the government has successfully brought the complete control over all aspects of asylum seekers' lives under one roof.

³¹ Some of the participants in this study were very chaotic for the first couple of years, and found it extremely difficult to deal with their claim (see chapters five and six)

Conclusion

From the moment a person is forced to flee their home and decides to claim asylum, the story of their personal experiences becomes very important, and subjected to a network of power relations in a variety of ways. Firstly, the notion of the refugee has emerged from the initial premise that the citizen who belongs to a modern nation-state is the norm, and the refugee is neither represented nor protected by the state, instead refugee lives are characterized by displacement and statelessness. Soguk (1999: 9) argues that such ‘processes of statecraft’ inevitably problematise a person who does not fit into the ‘citizen/nation/state hierarchy’ as a refugee. In addition, historically, asylum has been conceived as a ‘tool of the state’, since allowing entry to refugees was useful for the state in a variety of ways (Schuster, 2003). From the onset, dominant narratives of ‘the refugee’ were situated in, and confirming of a statist paradigm, which continuously shaded how members of host populations would think about them. The idea of refugees as problems was reinforced by a statist ideology, and determined by the emerging Cold War. The definition of a ‘refugee’ was mostly created with the person fleeing communist states in mind, and the criteria by which a person could be defined as a ‘refugee’ under the Geneva Convention developed within this context. The personal refugee story has subsequently always needed to match these criteria in order to be granted Refugee Status.

Secondly, since the end of the Cold War, this paradigm has shifted, and the procedure for asylum applications and decision-making on claims has developed within the contours of a policy framework that emerged in response to some significant changes in the global political landscape. The end of the Cold War caused populations around the globe to be overwhelmed by political, social, and economic insecurity. As a result, millions of people

in the Middle East, Asia, the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, have been on the move. Western states, instead of upholding a commitment to human rights, have felt a threat to their social order, and moved towards an approach of restricting entry. In Britain, asylum and immigration policy has evolved into a system designed to prevent asylum applicants from ever reaching Britain's shores, and process those that do manage to claim swiftly.

As a result, even though the telling of the personal refugee story during the asylum application process was always important, it has become even more so since the issue of 'credibility' became an explicit legal requirement with the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants) Act 2004. Refugee stories in the determination procedure need to be coherent, consistent, answer a certain logic or rationality, all of which will help the claim to be considered credible. It has become very difficult for any claim for asylum to be recognized as meeting the criteria of the Refugee Convention, and the requirements of British policy. Since the lives of refugees depend so much on how they manage to communicate their experiences into credible stories, it is of vital interest to investigate how refugee stories as the basis for asylum claims are told and interpreted within the asylum determination procedure, especially since the introduction of the New Asylum Model, within which since the withdrawal of the Statement of Evidence Form, refugees have only one opportunity to tell their stories. Close scrutiny of how asylum stories are listened to and interpreted during the asylum decision making process will be of extreme importance in the future.

Chapter Four

UNRAVELLING DOMINANT REFUGEE NARRATIVES IN A STORYTELLING SOCIETY

Introduction

The previous chapter explored how the public perception that citizens have of refugees is filtered through a 'statist' paradigm (Soguk, 1999), and how individual refugee stories are constructed as fraudulent, not credible and untrue within the asylum policy framework in Britain. This chapter will continue to explore the different strands of the network of power relations that shape the sharing of personal refugee stories in the public domain. It will do so by unravelling the dominant social and political narratives through which refugee lives are lived and told, and exploring how this complexity or 'web' (Benhabib, 1992: 198) of dominant narratives manipulates the public mind in Britain into an audience unreceptive to personal refugee stories in a variety of ways.

For individual life stories to be told, there needs to be an audience willing to listen, stories need to feed into 'communities that will create and hear those stories: social worlds, interpretive communities, communities of memory' (Plummer, 1995: 145). The stories of some marginalised groups are rarely told and seldom heard, and often do not find a receptive audience. In their discussion of the use of biography in relation to refugees and asylum seekers, O'Neill and Harindranath (2005: 40) pose the question of how, as members of the British public, the potential audience for refugee stories in

Britain, we ‘come to understand the lived experience of “asylum”, exile and processes of belonging’, especially when these experiences are mostly represented by others.

A storyteller is both the person who tells the story, and the person about whom stories are told. The stories told *about* individuals, or groups of individuals, form what Benhabib (1992: 198) defines as a ‘web of narratives’, and what I explain as a complexity of dominant stories, or a myriad of myths, of which the origin is often unclear, and the direction unknown. It is within such ‘webs of narratives’ that individuals develop a sense of who they are, and a sense of what is right, and it is within these ‘worlds of discourse which regulate lives’ that people shape their existence (Plummer, 1995: 144-145)³². In Britain, the public mind is bombarded with a complexity of dominant refugee narratives, which contain powerful images of refugees and asylum seekers. These narratives portray refugees as victims, or are mediated through a state-centred paradigm, which emphasizes the belonging of citizens to Western states through constructing refugees as the ‘other’. Other strands of knowledge about refugees are portrayed through political discourses which often confuse them with other types of migrants, define them as ‘problems’ in terms of integration and social cohesion, and are mediated through ‘images and narratives of mass media institutions’ (O’Neill and Harindranath, 2005: 40), which leaves most members of the British public oblivious to refugee experiences from the perspective of the refugee.

³² For an interesting discussion on how people make sense of themselves in the context of dominant narratives see Thompson and Samuel (1990) *The Myths We Live By* and Thompson (2000) *The Voice of the Past*.

Since the sharing of personal refugee stories needs to compete with the narratives about refugees as represented by others, it appears that personal refugee stories are subjected to an interwoven set of power relationships, in which social practices such as ‘domination, hierarchy, marginalisation and inequality’ operate to determine which voices will ‘claim to dominate, ...top the hierarchy, ...claim the centre, and ...possess the resources’ (Plummer, 1995: 30). Since more powerful voices have easier access to audiences willing to listen, are more capable of controlling which issues will be on the political agenda, and have more influence on the kind of language in which certain issues will be discussed, the question of how personal refugee stories are situated in this ‘wider framework of power’ becomes inevitable (ibid), and is crucial to this study. Therefore, this chapter will investigate the British public as a potential audience, by exploring how dominant political and social narratives about refugees prevail in shaping public perception, and examining how and why personal refugee stories continue to have difficulty in finding communities willing to listen.

An Audience for Refugee Stories

In relation to the dynamic of different versions of refugee lives, and the difficulty in finding communities willing to listen to refugee stories, I suggest that there is a *silence* surrounding refugee lives, a lack of a space or a platform where refugee experiences can be shared, which Tony Kushner (2006: 198–199) describes as ‘the absence of a national narrative framework’. In his book *Remembering Refugees*, he uses the Mass Observation Archive 2000 to explore how people use experiences from the past to rationalize the

social exclusion of asylum seekers in the present. The Mass Observation Archive³³ is a social anthropological study in which ordinary members of the public are required to keep diaries to write about specific events that are of significance to British society. Through the summer 2000 directive, participants were asked to reflect and write on their experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in the present and in the past. Amongst the responses, Kushner found that participants were likely to initially deny any involvement with refugees, but often followed their denial by quite in depth experiences of connection, which he interprets as revealing the ‘powerful tradition of refugee settlement in twentieth century Britain but the *absence of a national narrative framework* in which to place it’ (Kushner, 2006: 198-199; my emphasis).

Many respondents remembered having been involved with refugees, after an initial phase of denial, such as one woman from Middlesex, who has Jewish grandparents from Lithuania and Ukraine on her fathers’ side, whilst the grandparents on her mothers’ side descended from French Huguenots and Scottish peasants. Although this respondent acknowledges the history of this country as a place of safety for those in need, she did not succeed to situate any personal links to her refugee origins within Britain. It was not until she visited the Museum of Immigration on Ellis Island in New York³⁴, that she managed to feel a sense of connection to her grandparents’ immigrant past. The difficulty of situating one’s connections to refugee history within a British context is quite typical of Britain’s refusal to accept its ‘past diversity’, and makes it difficult for British people

³³ For more information on the Mass Observation Archive, please visit www.mass.obs.org.uk

³⁴ Ellis Island was the ‘gateway’ into America for nearly 15 million immigrants between 1892 and 1954, where they had to undergo some medical examination, and their ‘bona fides as a potential American were checked’ before they would be allowed into the land of ‘gold and freedom’ (Brownstone, Franck, and Brownstone, 1979: 14).

with an immigrant or refugee background to think of themselves within, what Kushner (2006: 199) names, a 'local' tradition. In this sense, he suggests a duality surrounding refugee lives, and uses some of his own experiences as an example for this. When he started working in the History Department at Southampton University, he learned that the department, although displaying a strong appearance of 'Englishness', was in fact home to refugees from Nazism, and of Yugoslav and Czech origin. This 'twoness, of refugees being everywhere and nowhere, is a tension running throughout [this] study of British history, heritage and politics', and a key interest in his book (Kushner, 2006: 11 - 12).

Other social commentators have similar views, for example Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (in Arbabzadah, 2007), in the foreword to *From Outside In: Refugees and British society*, a collection of personal experience stories of refugees' settlement in Britain, also highlights a duality in Britain's attitudes to immigrants:

[T]his country has two faces when it comes to incomers. They never look at each other. One is warm, the other surly. These days it is mostly the surly one we see....[P]ublic figures increasingly seek to impose protectionist walls around these isles and perpetually scapegoat immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. They also speak warmly about cosmopolitan Britain. The two faces again. Research shows the economic benefits of immigration; the London Olympic bid was won because the city is seen as a multifarious hub of voluntary and involuntary arrivals. So which is the real nation? And are we a menace or an asset (ibid)?

Similar contradictions ran through the interviews contributed by the research participants, especially those who worked with refugees. One participant emphasized that the media and politicians play to xenophobic attitudes whilst never publicising the positive attitudes of the host community, and she indicated that despite the negative images in the media, there is a long and growing waiting list of volunteers who want to offer their time to the detainee befriending scheme at the Gatwick Detainee Welfare Project:

...[I]t makes me very upset that politicians and the media have to play to the xenophobia rather than to the generosity of the people. There is a lot of sympathy for asylum seekers, even with higher numbers, the bad press, and these negative images...and yet, we have to turn volunteers away. I think it is time that they start highlighting the good things that happen (RW 9).

However, many interviewees highlighted pure hostility towards themselves, and towards the work they did with refugees. One participant revealed that he would often not disclose that he had come to Britain as a refugee:

You see, I've been here for five years, and myself, I feel unsafe, because of these things in the media. When I go somewhere, and I introduce myself I'm afraid that when they find out I am a refugee they may not welcome me, you are aware of this all the time (RW 2).

Furthermore, others have also noted the lack of a collective knowledge of Britain's refugee history, which contributes to the marginalisation of refugee voices. As Nushin Arbabzadah states:

Little attempt is made to show the continuity of refugee history in Britain, its part in the story of the nation. On the contrary, refugees are frequently depicted as part of a new phenomenon without precedence in the country's past. Even though refugees are among the most publicly discussed of Britain's communities, they remain misunderstood and silent. They are talked about and commented upon ad nauseam, but are rarely given the opportunity to speak for themselves and tell us their sides of the story. If we are regularly informed about the British public's (or its newspaper's columnists) views on refugees, we are rarely told what refugees in turn think of Britain and its society and culture. It is as if their side of the story holds no weight precisely because they are refugees (2007: 27).

Refugee stories give account of quite specific experiences of suffering, are often told with strong emotions, which in turn evoke strong emotional responses when listened to. Jennifer Langer (2002), who collated the experiences of refugee women in *Crossing the Border: voices of refugee and exiled women*, found that many refugee women had difficulty in sharing their experiences with members of the host community because no

one seemed particularly interested in their life stories, or their motivations for flight, and many felt they were 'stereotyped as a refugee rather than as an individual'. Women also felt it was difficult to share their experiences of violence, because of a lack of a space where this is possible. They found that such experiences 'are not articulated in the public domain', instead there seems to be a 'complete denial of the reality of refugee women's experiences of rape, with no-one here connecting with it or acknowledging it' (2002: 13). Sometimes it is easier for members of the host nation to avoid listening to such stories all together, since refugee stories carry the possibility of emotional upheaval.

The work of Stanley Cohen (2000) has the potential to offer a more psychological explanation of why refugee stories do not find audiences. He argues that information which contains images of suffering, or stories of atrocities, presents a threat to the psychological wellbeing of the receiver of these images. A person who feels threatened by such information can respond in a variety of ways, all of which represent some form of denial. Cohen (2000) identifies three forms of denial: literal denial, interpretative denial, and implicatory denial. Literal denial involves the blatant refusal to believe the presented information, the idea that 'something did not happen'. Interpretative denial means that the presented information is reinterpreted in a way that enables the receiver to cope with it more easily. For example, 'I am a social drinker, not an alcoholic', or 'this person is not a genuine refugee, but an illegal immigrant'. Finally, implicatory denial, which Cohen explains as 'a way to avoid moral demands', this is where a person might shrug their shoulders and think 'what can I do about it' (ibid).

These forms of denial are personal, and Cohen adds concepts such as official and cultural denial, where denial becomes a shared, social phenomenon. Official denial is where the state manages and controls the information production of a situation in a way that enables an entire population to deny that a situation of atrocities is happening³⁵. Cultural denial occurs where a whole society fails to acknowledge ‘forms of cruelty, discrimination, repression, or exclusion’ about which the public knows, but which it does not acknowledge (ibid: 11). He uses the term ‘bystander’ to describe people who do not react to knowledge of the suffering of others, because they belong to a society which is wholly permeated by a culture of denial. They are the ones termed ‘the public’, ‘audiences’, or ‘ordinary people’ (140–145).

Some of these ideas were worked out in a study by Cohen and Seu (2002), in which images of atrocities were presented to three different focus groups. These images were of human rights abuse, and used by Amnesty International in an appeal for aid. They evoked a strong emotional response from all participants, who found them shocking, repulsive and heartless, and they made them feel sick. The strength of the emotions also raised the issue of inactivity; if you feel so strongly about a situation, you might also feel you ought to do something about it. Therefore, some participants thought it easier to avoid images of suffering all together. Secondly, participants expressed the view that they were constantly overloaded with such images, which raised the issue of ‘de-sensitisation’ to atrocities. An overload of images can lead to ‘fatigue’. ‘It’s just one thing after another. People hear it every day’. And, although some felt an element of responsibility, most

³⁵ Please see the Introduction to this thesis for the example of the Australian authorities’ actions in both the Tampa situation and the Woomera hunger strike.

participants expressed a deep sense of helplessness: ‘...how can you stop them, those individual things, in that country. We do care, we don’t agree with what is going on, we just don’t know what to do. We are too small, and the problem is too big’ (Cohen and Seu, 2002: 192-196).

Although historically many refugees have settled in this country, it remains difficult for their stories to find communities willing to listen, which suggests a *silence* surrounding refugee lives, or an ‘absence of a national narrative framework’ (Kushner, 2006: 198–199), the lack of a space or a platform where refugee experiences can be shared. Instead of reflecting Britain’s past as permeated by refugees and their histories, a tension which Kushner names a ‘twoness’ (2006: 11 - 12) shapes the public’s mindset towards refugee stories. It is difficult for these tales to find an audience because the lack of a ‘narrative framework’ makes it impossible for refugees and the public to communicate and share experiences. In many ways the public as a potential audience behaves as ‘bystanders’ who are people who know of the suffering of others, but choose not to react, because their attitudes are manipulated by a culture of denial. (Cohen, 2000: 140–145).

The previous chapter advocated the idea that the perception that members of the British public have of themselves as citizens, and of the lives of refugees and asylum seekers as the ‘other’, is deeply rooted in a statist paradigm. The focus of this chapter is to offer a theoretical understanding of how the public mind is shaped by this citizen/nation/state narrative, which is closely linked with a complexity of refugee narratives, a set of interlinked strands of dominant knowledge about refugees, of which the origin is often obscure, and the direction unclear. Some of these images are extremely powerful in

shaping public perception, and the narratives about refugees portrayed are so loudly present, that even when individual refugee stories are being told, they are difficult to detect amongst the variety of noises that are clamouring for attention. In these circumstances, how can personal refugee tales persuade an unwilling audience to take an interest?

Unravelling a Complexity of Refugee Narratives

Since the sharing of personal refugee stories is subjected to an interwoven set of power relationships, where more powerful voices have easier access to audiences willing to listen, are more capable of controlling which issues will be on the political agenda, and have more influence on the kind of language in which certain issues will be discussed, it is crucial to explore the ‘web of narratives’ that prevails in shaping the public mind in Britain to the extent that the public has become impermeable as a potential audience for the personal experience tales of refugees. Personal stories are not ‘transparent renditions of reality’ (Eastmond, 2007: 252), and to understand the stories contributed to this study, in which the interviewees revealed who they are, why they came here, and how they experienced the changes in their lives, they must be interpreted through the social and political narratives in which these lives have unfolded.

Where the previous chapter explored the narrative of how refugee stories are constructed as lacking in credibility within the asylum policy framework, the following discussion will investigate how the narrative of Britain as a ‘safe haven’, the narrative of refugees as the ‘other’, the narrative of the refugee as a ‘disguised’ economic migrant, and the narrative of integration and social cohesion, affect the public as a potential audience for

personal refugee stories. It is important to note that these narratives do not have clear boundaries, the divisions between them are blurred, and they are inextricably intertwined. However, attempting to unravel them one by one will enable an exploration of how these narratives remain dominant in shaping public discourses, thereby manipulating the public into an unwilling audience for personal refugee stories.

Narrative of Britain as a 'Safe Haven'

Historically the nation-state has encompassed many different cultures and social groups, and has insisted on 'exclusive citizenship, regulating border controls, demanding political allegiance and standardizing linguistic practice' in an attempt to create a notion of unity amongst its population. These elusive links were made to create a sense of national belonging that would supersede political, social, cultural and linguistic differences (Papastergiadis, 2000: 82-83). Benedict Anderson (1991: 4) explains this process as the 'imagining' of a national community. Since it is impossible to know all the fellow members, people share a *narrative of the nation* (Hall, 2000: 182-184; see also Papastergiadis, 2000: 82-83), which facilitates the process of belonging to the nation-state. The *narrative of the nation* stipulates who belongs and who does not belong to the nation, and it requires a continuous 'nurturing' through practices such as 'education,...the media, popular culture, [or] historical heritage', or else it might not achieve the coherence needed to unite the diversity of groups that constitute the nation (Hall, 2000: 182-184).

Refugee lives have been part of national myth-making in that the image of a 'good' citizen, with an 'ideal' national identity, who belongs to a liberal democratic nation-state has been substantiated by the notion that a nation-state can offer a 'safe haven' to those in

need of refuge. The myth of Britain as a 'safe haven' is very much embedded in its national history and part of its national identity. Since politicians will hardly ever miss an opportunity to remind their audiences of their 'tolerant' past (Steve Cohen, 2003), it is widely believed that Britain has a long history of offering a place of safety to those in need of protection. This practice however has not always been accompanied by a warm and generous welcome for those arriving in need of protection.

Although the British public likes to think of itself as belonging to a tolerant nation, its response to new arrivals has been varied throughout history, which again reeks of the 'twoness' towards refugees in British culture. For example, the Huguenots, who entered Britain during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Bloch, 2002: 22; Sassen, 1998: 7), are often remembered as a highlight of Britain's tolerant history towards refugees (Cohen, 2003: 117). It is widely accepted that they were welcomed as refugees from Catholicism, that they emphasized Britain's 'open-hearted' reputation (Cohen, 1994), and were appreciated for their 'valuable skills and trade' (Schuster, 2003: 74). However, hostility towards Huguenot refugees existed, especially amongst those that now had to endure more competition for valuable workplaces. In 1593, apprentices protested against the newcomers, painting anti-immigrant language on walls since there were no newspapers as yet to print their primarily economic concerns (Greenslade, 2005: 9).

Another historic example which underlies the myth of Britain as a 'safe haven' is that in the 19th century Britain allowed entry to some revolutionary individuals, most notably Karl Marx, who had to flee Europe because of their radical politics. The numbers of these entrants were very low, and the Secretary of State enacted legislation in 1848 which gave

him the right to remove aliens if he felt they threatened the prevailing social order (Cohen, 2003: 118), again emphasizing the idea of Britain's generous history towards refugees as a myth.

By mid-nineteenth century, newspapers had achieved mass media status, and racist comments on immigrant groups such as the Irish and the Jews did not need to be painted on any walls, but instead could be printed and reach mass audiences. Greenslade (2005: 9) argues that newspapers were merely 'echoing' the views of their readers, claiming that 'a xenophobic people and a xenophobic press were in harmony'. It is therefore no surprise that public opinion and political responses towards Jewish people escaping the pogroms in Russia, who started arriving in the 1880s were shaped by intolerant and anti-Semitic tendencies (Schuster, 2003: 81-82), thereby revealing the intolerance that simmered underneath the idea of Britain as a liberal nation.

Knox and Kushner (1999: 22-23) describe how newspaper coverage at the time succeeded in portraying the 'alien Jew' as despicable in an article called 'So-Called Refugees'³⁶ which described the arrival of Jewish refugees in Southampton on board the *Cheshire*. The new arrivals, 'fought....jostled....pushed and struggled' for a place on board, where they spent most of their time gambling. However they were clever enough to hide their winnings when they asked for train fares from the Relief Committee, as the article stated, they 'hid their gold'. In order to achieve the representation of English passengers in extreme contrast, the same article described them as a 'few quiet, sad-faced Englishmen', who, although they were poverty stricken and 'dead broke,....refused to

³⁶ 'So-Called Refugees', *Daily Mail*, 3 February 1900 in Knox and Kushner (1999: 23).

take a half-penny', thus managing to create an image of 'popular Englishness' (Knox and Kushner, 1999: 23).

In a similar vein, public responses to refugees from Nazi-Germany 1933-1938 were often mixed and ambivalent (Knox and Kushner, 1999). Although fascist movements were not part of British mainstream politics, anti-Semitic views did find support amongst the population, and the government restricted entry to Jewish refugees from Nazism rather than challenge the anti-Semites. Those who were allowed entry would have to be supported by the established Jewish community in Britain, because it was feared that refugees may become a financial burden, and that their numbers would increase intolerance (Cohen, 2003: 114). Admission policy only became more tolerant when the British public expressed their disgust after *Kristallnacht* in November 1938 (Schuster, 2003: 88).

Although the idea of Britain as a safe haven is questionable, its power in shaping the public mind should not be underestimated:

While the myth of Britain's liberal and generous tradition of granting asylum is just that, a myth, nevertheless that myth has acquired a power of its own, rendering it impossible for the state to abolish asylum completely. It has also served to protect the few who make it to Britain, and acts as a touchstone and inspiration for individual defenders of liberal values. These functions should not be underestimated – while illiberal Germany was creating refugees and importing slave labour, liberal Britain was receiving refugees (however few) (Schuster, 2003: 89).

It becomes evident, that even though Britain is adamant in closing its borders for those claiming asylum, it also wants to cling to the idea of itself as a 'safe haven' and a 'tolerant' nation, and it needed to create a negative image of the 'other' to be able to do

this. Britain is not prepared to be a 'safe haven' for *all* those who claim asylum, and during the 1990s, public debates fuelled by media and politicians focused on being a safe haven for those who were considered 'genuine' refugees, whilst increasing a variety of harsh measures in an attempt to keep out 'bogus' refugees, illegal immigrants, and other unwanted asylum seekers (please see the previous chapter for a detailed account). The stereotypical image of an outsider within national myth making creates an 'enemy', a hostile image against which members of the nation can define themselves (Mosse, 1978; 1991). The role of the *narrative of the 'other'* is to provide the citizen with an antagonistic image against which they can define themselves as 'good' citizens with an 'ideal' national identity.

Narrative of the 'Other'

The use of the 'other' to emphasize the citizens' identity is as old as the concept of citizenship itself. In ancient Greece, the cradle of modern democracy and citizenship, Greek colonists enslaved the local populations of the islands and regions they conquered, and these populations were considered to be Greek (Harvey, 1988: 37). A well-known contradiction in Greek society is that as its politics became more democratic, the use of slave trade increased, and the status of women moved closer to the position of slaves, rather than to the status of citizens. Since Greek citizens thought of themselves as civilised human beings, who lived in a society that had 'freedom' as one of its core values, they needed to find ways to justify the use of slaves. An understanding of the role of theatre in Greek culture illuminates how Greek citizens came to terms with this contradiction, since it was through drama that cultural value systems were presented and either supported or challenged.

The tension between democratic values and slavery becomes apparent in the work of Menander, an Athenian playwright who lived around 300 BC. The actors in his plays wore masks that were made according to the 'science' of physiognomy. Using particular characteristics to correspond to specific features in the face and body, the masks were used to divide actors into categories, which represented a hierarchical structure: free before slave, male before female, and age before youth. The most important polarity was between free and enslaved males. In Greek society, some groups were on the fringes of these categories, there were poor people who were free but not citizens, and there were some wealthy slaves, such as slave bankers. These groups blurred the lines of the polar opposition between free and slave, and they were omitted from Menander's plays. Instead, the use of masks, language, the naming of slaves, and stereotyping assisted in creating and reinforcing polarity between a free citizen and a slave. In fact, 'no surviving Greek drama allows a free young man to be mistaken for a slave, nor a slave for a free man' (Wiles, 1988: 54-63).

In ancient Greek society, drama was used to vilify the image of the slave, which did not necessarily bear a resemblance to who they were or what they did in real life, but it justified for Greek citizens the use of slaves, without compromising the democratic values of freedom and civilisation. In modern times, the mass media apparatus has replaced the use of drama to create the 'outsider' image. One of the main characteristics of media images of crime and deviance is that they reflect as well as enhance fears and intolerance of the 'other'. Greer and Yewkes (2005) emphasize the way in which this intolerance is embedded within the idea of creating an 'other' image as the way in which individuals preserve the notion of 'an idealized self'. They use the psycho-analytic theory

of Melanie Klein that individuals will unconsciously disconnect from those parts of their personality that they fear, and project them onto others. They explain the process of ‘splitting and projection’ as ‘scapegoating’, and argue that an appreciation of this process assists in understanding how the process of polarization, ‘inclusion and exclusion... insiders and outsiders, us and them, men and women, black and white, normal and deviant’ is significant in shaping identities (ibid: 2005).

An interesting illustration of ‘splitting’ unwanted characteristics away from the self and ‘projecting’ them onto others is to be found in Bauman’s (1997) theoretical personages, *tourists* and *vagabonds*, through which he attempts to explain how people manage their lives when plagued by the uncertainties of postmodern life. The person who has the ability to achieve this to perfection is the tourist, whose life can be seen as a coping mechanism, a strategy employed to survive in a world characterised by postmodern insecurities. The tourist likes the idea of a safe and secure place that they can call home, as long as this remains an idea, they do not wish to have their freedom constrained by having to stay at home. The vagabond is the exact opposite of the tourist, they would like to have the freedom to stay at home, but are not allowed to. In a globalised world they are forced to be on the move, against their will. The world and its inhabitants are unfriendly and unwelcoming to the vagabond, and often they have to move because people are no longer willing to accept their *alien presence*. Vagabonds have no *freedom of choice*, live at the lowest end of the postmodern social hierarchy, and if they did not exist, they would not be missed, were it not for the fact that they have a role to fulfill. Vagabonds serve as an *alter ego* for the tourist, a place where tourists can dispose of their greatest fears, their low self-esteem and their guilt.

The idea of the vagabond highlights, as argued by Greer and Yewkes (2005), a polarization and is what the poor mean to the rich, the stranger to the native, and the refugee to the citizen. The *alter ego* is the ‘public exposition of the innermost private, as an inner demon to be publicly exorcised’ (Bauman, 1997: 89-94), it brings one's hidden, private unpleasantness into the open, and makes it public. The tourist *needs* the vagabond as an *alter ego*, because vagabond life provides the darkness against which tourist life is highlighted as more positive. Bauman’s key argument is that tourists manage to cope with uncertain postmodern life, because vagabonds ‘are the dark background against which the sun of the tourist shines so brightly that the spots are hardly seen. The darker the background, the brighter the shine. The more repulsive and abhorrent the lot of the vagabond, the more bearable are the minor discomforts and major risks of the tourist life’ (ibid).

The ‘splitting’ of our fears and insecurities and ‘projecting’ them onto the ‘other’ has remained persistent throughout Western social and political history. As discussed earlier, the public responses to the Huguenots, and the vicious media portrayal and xenophobia towards the Jews at various times in history, demonstrate that the image of refugees as the ‘other’ is no stranger in British society. However, the media portrayal of refugees and asylum seekers in the last few decades makes a sharp contrast with the hostile images in the past, in that the general tone has tended to be more ‘hysterical’ and ‘repetitious’, and more importantly, contemporary mass media have the power to manipulate the political agenda to an extent that has not been witnessed before (Greenslade, 2005: 21).

Newspapers realized the extensive anxieties about asylum seekers amongst the public before introducing their crusade against them, and as Greenslade (2005: 5-6) argues ‘prejudice bred mythical stories and/or mythical stories bred prejudice’, by which he means that newspapers made mythical stories credible by magnifying and intensifying unreliable accounts about asylum seekers’ lives. The public in turn would use such stories as ‘reliable’ information, and so began a ‘process, in which the press both reflects and enhances public attitudes and thereby sets off a chain reaction in which the reflection and enhancement go on escalating until *reality is buried under layers of myth and prejudice*’ (Greenslade, 2005: 5-6; my emphasis).

The most common myths include slogans such as ‘Britain is seen as the softest of touches’ (*Daily Mail*, 26 Feb 2000) and ‘the figures for asylum seekers, almost all of them bogus, are totally appalling’ (*Sunday People*, 13 Feb 2000), which both relate to the numbers of people entering and the credibility of their stories. Statements such as ‘a few refugees receive huge benefits’ (*Daily Mirror*, 15 March 2000) describe the welfare they are thought to be given, or relate to the idea that asylum seekers are really disguised economic migrants who tell fraudulent stories, and are portrayed as ‘asylum cheats’ (*the Sun*, 20 May 2003). In this way, media images shape public perception and determine the terms of public debate, even though the information given is inaccurate, and often ‘deliberately misleading about the scale and impact of asylum’ (Lewis, 2005: 23),

In a comprehensive research project into public attitudes towards asylum seekers carried out for the Institute for Public Policy Research, Miranda Lewis (2005: 1) claims that ‘[A]sylum seekers have become the subject of a concern which is disproportionate to the

actual impact of their presence'. Findings demonstrated that public opinion reflects the hostile media images of asylum seekers, that they are perceived as a threat, and that in the last few years, issues of asylum and immigration have become a significant priority in the 'top three of national concerns'.

There are numerous examples of how media images have influenced public concerns, but one example of quite extreme ignorance and intolerance is to be found in the protest by residents of Lee-on-Solent against government plans to build an accommodation centre for asylum seekers in their town. One of the protesters admitted that the main source of information about asylum seekers was the headlines in the tabloid media. The irrational beliefs that lived amongst local residents included fear of rape, HIV/Aids, crime and security. They believed that one can tell who is an asylum seeker by their appearance, that they look hostile, probably have a beard, and that they are 'Iraqi looking'. This campaign had unquestioned support in all the local media, and the government claimed it had to abandon its plans for the accommodation centre for 'technical reasons' (Dispatches, Channel Four, 2004).

It seems clear from this example that 'panic discourses' which reflect the broad consensus between politicians, the media and the public, seem justified because 'refugee-type foreigners' need to be kept out (Cohen, 2002: xix-xxi). Where such discourses have free rein, and local residents have no other sources of information about refugees and asylum seekers, it leads to a climate of fear and hostility, thereby maintaining a 'culture of denial'. The public relate the fears and insecurities about major social, political and cultural changes, such as a perceived lack of community cohesion, the destabilization of a

British national identity, rise in crime, generosity of welfare benefits, housing problems, and population growth, to the significance they think asylum seekers have. A general unease about the 'pace of social change underpins many negative attitudes towards asylum seekers' (Lewis, 2005: 36), and even though asylum seekers bear little or no relationship to these changes at all, they strongly resemble the 'vagabond' persona, and 'have been made into scapegoats for a variety of society's current ills' (Greenslade, 2005: 5-6).

Where drama in ancient Greece was used to create a specific image of slaves, in order to justify how they were treated in a society underpinned by so-called democratic principles, in modern society the mass media have successfully achieved the distorted portrayal of refugees and asylum seekers at different times in history. Especially in recent decades, asylum reporting has been unbalanced, inaccurate, and irresponsible; the personal stories of how people came to be refugees are seldom told, and the predicament of refugees and asylum seekers is rarely explained. Greenslade quite rightly asks how the audience of such myths can see through the 'distorted media narrative' if they are only fed information that is 'hostile, one-sided, lacking in context, and often wildly inaccurate' (2005: 29), and it becomes evident that where personal stories need a receptive audience in order to be told, in Britain, as long as the image of refugees and asylum seekers as the 'other' prevails, the public mind continues to be impermeable to the stories these 'others' could tell.

Economic Migrant or Refugee? A Narrative of Confusing Images

In chapter three I discussed the migration-asylum nexus, which challenges the classic distinction between refugees and other types of migrants. On the one hand refugees are seen as forced migrants, who leave their countries for political reasons whilst other migrants are thought to have left their homelands mainly for economic reasons. Some scholars advocate the notion that it is difficult to make a clear distinction between refugees and economic migrants, since in many refugee and migrant producing countries, traditional social order as well as economic organisation has been destroyed by processes such as colonisation, industrialisation and globalisation, which, in combination with the reformation of states and nations, means that there are close relationships between poverty, unstable government, conflicts between different social groups, and human rights abuse (Castles and Miller, 2003: 32).

In my view, it is the immigration policies and political discourses in receiving countries that categorise new entrants either as refugees or economic migrants (Schuster, 2003), which is perhaps most evident in the how discourses changed when the British government began to acknowledge that the British economy needed migrant workers. During the 1990s the economic migrant image had been used to create the distinction between a ‘genuine’ political refugee, and a ‘bogus’ asylum seeker, who has not really been persecuted for political reasons, but had left their country for economic reasons, attracted to ‘soft touch’ Britain. Cohen (2002: xix) describes these discourses as:

...a single, virtually uninterrupted message of hostility and rejection. There is a constant background screen, interspersed with vivid little tableaux: Tamils at the airport, stripping in protest; Kurds clinging to the bottom of Eurostar trains; Chinese suffocating to death in a container lorry (ibid).

Following such ferocious discourses, when the government began to recognize that immigrant labour played a key role in British economy, the terms of political debate surrounding migration changed considerably.

The claim of Barbara Roche (2003) that she wanted to be the ‘first Immigration Minister to say that immigration was a good thing’ in 2000, and an influential Home Office research study (Glover et al, 2001; see also Sales, 2005: 446) which stated that there was ‘considerable support for the view that migrants create new businesses and jobs and fill labour market gaps, improving productivity and reducing inflationary pressures’, spurred the government on to adopt different strategies to draw in skilled migrant workers, whilst maintaining a tough stance on asylum seekers, which were set out as a ‘managed migration approach’ in the 2002 White Paper *Secure Borders, Safe Haven* (Sales, 2005: 445).

Significantly, in this debate the economic migrant image needed to be much more positive in order to change the public mind about migration, especially because during the 1990s asylum seekers had been vilified as ‘economic migrants’, and ‘bogus’ refugees. Political discourses therefore started to focus on the need for economic migrants as skilled workers, who are only allowed to enter Britain after having gone through cautiously managed migration procedures. Asylum seekers on the other hand, were portrayed as out of control, ‘they do not wait for permission and their claim to enter is based on *their* needs, not those of the country they seek to enter’ (Schuster, 2003: 240), and immigration controls for them will only become tighter (Cohen, 2003: 72). The focus on specific groups of highly skilled, professional migrants engenders an ‘elitist’ and

‘economically racist’ migration debate which does not consider migration for political reasons (ibid).

Another tension that filtered through the White Paper and encouraged restriction was the response to the riots between different communities in some poorer towns in the North of England in the summer 2001. This, in combination with the increase in public support for far-right parties across Europe, and with politicians and mass media clamouring for a halt to asylum seekers, as well as political gains for the British National Party, contributed to the calculated response of the government in Britain. In the White Paper it promised increased border controls, more restrictive measures for ‘illegal’ entry, whilst encouraging a system of ‘managed migration’ for skilled migrants. Furthermore, it pledged support to include those that had a right to, and needed assistance in settlement. The White Paper acknowledges the ‘need for us to foster and renew the social fabric of our communities and rebuild a sense of common citizenship’ (Home Office, 2002, in Sales, 2005: 446).

The focus on the notion on common citizenship and integration was crucial in the light of perceived economic needs, particularly when the Home Secretary at the time, David Blunkett (BBC, 13 November 2003) stated in an interview with Jeremy Paxman that there was ‘no obvious limit’ to the number of migrants allowed entry to the UK, because migrants were needed to fill gaps in the labour market. During the same interview, Blunkett insisted on cutting down the number of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants, thereby maintaining a tough stance on asylum. Blunkett aimed to manage Britain’s borders for those migrants that can fill gaps in the labour market, whilst practically

closing them to asylum seekers and ‘illegal’ immigrants. Any language that referred to asylum seekers as people who have fear of persecution, or who have suffered human rights abuses, and are in need of protection for humanitarian reasons, was difficult to find in this debate.

Especially when implementing immigration policies that acknowledge the need for migrant workers, it is important for governments to control, or at least *to seem to be in control* of its borders because the population perceives immigrants as competing for finite resources, such as welfare benefits, housing, health care etc, and as a threat to its national identity (Schuster, 2003: 241). Blunkett’s claims in the introduction of the 2002 White Paper are therefore very clear:

Having a clear, workable and robust nationality and asylum system is the pre-requisite to building the security and trust that is needed. Without it we cannot defeat those who would seek to stir up hate, intolerance and prejudice (Home Office, 2002: 4; see also Sales 2005: 449)

Such sentiments resonate closely Labour’s approach to immigration in the 1960s, when Roy Hattersley, the Home Secretary at the time, also sought to combine control with integration. The relationship between curbing immigration and race relations policies which emerged then, still seems to be the dominant approach at present. The 2002 White Paper proposals, alongside a focus on control, set out a clear strategy for promoting integration of refugees and migrants, based on social inclusion, community cohesion and the promotion of citizenship (ibid). The focus on integration has resulted in citizenship ceremonies (piloted in 2004), citizenship tests (implemented late 2005) and the condition of knowledge of the English language. Initiatives specifically for refugees have included the Refugee Integration Unit, the Refugee Integration Forum, some influential research

studies (Ager and Strang 2004a; 2004b), and the launch of *Integration Matters* (2005), in which the Home Office sets out its refugee integration strategy (Somerville, 2006: 18).

Despite these measures, the migrant worker issue still manages to rouse furious debates. The very recent House of Lords ‘Economic Impact of Immigration’ report³⁷ stated that immigration has no economic benefit to Britain, and instead highlighted the cost for the population:

Rising population density has potentially important economic consequences for the resident population, including impacts on housing, as well as wider welfare effects, especially in parts of England where immigrants are most concentrated (ibid).

Another report however, publicized a week later, claimed the exact opposite. One of Britain’s towns which has experienced an extremely high influx of migrants seems to be thriving very well. Slough, according to its inhabitants, is flourishing, and although some of the older migrant communities seem a bit worried, others are more optimistic and feel that the new migrants bring many new opportunities. Most new migrants only expressed praise for Slough’s ‘tolerance and adaptability and for the opportunities it provides’. Furthermore, David Rose (*Observer*, April 2008) found that ‘far from being a drain on its economy, migrants are essential to it’. Although people admit that there is more pressure on public services, they believe it is being dealt with, ‘Slough’s migrants are almost all in work, and so paying tax to pay for them’. In fact, migrant pupils at a local secondary school have improved the school’s overall results, and contributed to transforming its

³⁷ The House of Lords ‘Economic Impact of Immigration’ report by the Select Committee on Economic Affairs published April 2008

performance over the last four years, encouraging many residents from the host community to use the school again (ibid).

It is evident that political discourses and public debates surrounding asylum and immigration continue to set the framework within which the public, the potential audience for personal refugee stories, interprets information about asylum and immigration issues. In these debates, politicians continue to be unforthcoming in honestly discussing the legitimacy of granting asylum to those in need of protection. Therefore, where narratives of the ‘other’ include the distorted media portrayal of refugees and asylum seekers, which directly influences public opinion, the debates about managed migration have contributed to further confusion amongst the public, which finds it increasingly difficult to ‘distinguish between different groups of migrants’ (Lewis, 2005: 21). It has become a very complex debate, which is increasingly confusing, and in which any language that refers to asylum seekers as having fled persecution, and as people in need of protection is difficult to find.

Narrative of Integration and Social Cohesion

Given the government’s heightened interest in facilitating the successful integration of refugees, as part of the strategy of combining managed migration with policies to promote social cohesion, it is not surprising there have been numerous fairly recent studies on integration, most notably Ager and Strang (2004a and 2004b), and Rutter et. Al. (2007). The ambiguous nature of the concept of integration, renders it important to outline how it is defined in academic literature and in political discourses. Where some scholars argue integration is a ‘chaotic’ (Robinson, 1998: 118) term, and others

emphasize its meanings as ‘vague’ (Korac, 2003: 52), I believe it is possible to identify some different dimensions of integration. For Jeff Crisp (2004) local integration is ‘a process which leads to a durable solution for refugees’. It is composed of a legal, an economic, and a social element. As part of the legal process, once refugees have made a claim for asylum to a host country, they become entitled to a range of rights. Economic integration means the process whereby refugees manage to become financially independent, mainly through employment. Social integration is the process that involves both refugees and members of the host population, and it means that they manage to live together without fear of being discriminated, intimidated or exploited. This discussion of integration may be extended by including access to education, in order to increase the chance of employment, and access to health and other social services. In some receiving countries, support is available for establishing communities (Korac, 2003: 52).

Since the increase in the numbers of spontaneous asylum seekers during the 1990s, the political voices of the public and the media have become more significant in asylum debates. Whilst this process has directly shaped policies for the reception of asylum seekers across a number of European countries, including Britain, the conceptual approach to the reception of asylum seekers and the provision of services have been quite different between countries, often corresponding to the existing approach to welfare provision in general (Korac, 2003). Countries such as Sweden or the Netherlands have developed reception programmes within a more bureaucratic, state controlled model, and in southern Europe, most notably Italy, which does not have such a well established welfare state, new arrivals have had to rely on services provided by charities such as church organisations (Wren, 2007).

In Britain, during the 1970s and 1980s, the groups of refugees that entered Britain were mainly dealt with as ‘programme refugees’, which meant that the government could exercise a high level of control over how many refugees were allowed entry, and where they would settle. When the number of ‘spontaneous’ asylum seekers increased during the 1990s the British government felt the need to rethink how to facilitate their settlement, and also wanted to find ways to restrict access to welfare services in order to deter new claimants. Initially ‘spontaneous’ new arrivals had access to housing, welfare and employment, which, although more limited, was not dissimilar to the entitlements of members of the host community. The 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act however, heralded a significant change to the reception and settlement of asylum seekers and refugees in Britain (Wren, 2007). It introduced NASS, which became responsible for all social security provision for asylum seekers, separating them entirely from mainstream society.

Subsequent to the 1999 Act, the British government continued its restrictive approach through a series of legislative measures, and has managed to bring the asylum procedure and the lives of asylum seekers during their claim for asylum, under control. The overall asylum process has made the settlement of refugees an ‘end to end’ system, which involved the setting up of a network of induction, accommodation and removal centers to deal with asylum applications, whilst at the same time, ‘managing’ claimants in such centers has ensured that they can be removed quite swiftly once their claim has been refused (please see chapter three for a more detailed discussion). In this way, reception and settlement programmes in Britain are beginning to resemble the highly state-controlled approach of the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries.

Some studies suggest that separation through high levels of state control and rigid structural barriers leads to the lack of a space, or a platform where citizens and refugees can meet and socialize, comparable to Kushner's (2006) idea of the lack of a 'national narrative framework', as discussed earlier in this chapter. For example, Malkki (1991, 1995) carried out a comparative study of Hutu refugees from Burundi in Tanzania, where some settled in refugee camps, and others in some Tanzanian cities. Those in the cities tended to integrate much more into Tanzanian society, even marrying Tanzanians, whilst those in the camps remained separated from their host society, and strongly maintained their Hutu identity, which suggests that a more controlled approach to the settlement of refugees is potentially detrimental to the forming of social ties and links into the host community.

In addition, the argument that a state-controlled approach to the settlement of refugees is not without consequences, is supported by Korac's study (2003), which compares the settlement of refugees from former Yugoslavia in Italy and the Netherlands. The findings demonstrated that in the Netherlands refugees experienced a state-led system of integration, which kept them separate from Dutch society, and heightened their sense of isolation. As Korac (2003: 58) argues, '...the system has led them stage by stage through the *integration* process, leaving no need for intense networking and search for alternative routes into the system'. In Italy however, although new arrivals had a very difficult initial stage, sometimes characterised by sleeping rough, and receiving little or no state-led support at all, most refugees managed to develop strong social bonds with Italians, either where they lived, worked, or because they needed help. Refugees had no choice but to 'find their own way into society' (ibid: 58-60).

Similar arguments have been made by Ghorashi (2005), who carried out a study of two groups of Iranian women in the Netherlands. One group arrived and settled prior to the changes in Dutch refugee settlement policy of 1987, when asylum seekers had some level of freedom in access to employment and education, and another group who arrived post 1990, and experienced the newly established, highly state-controlled entry programme for asylum seekers in the Netherlands. The women of the first cohort expressed their experiences as having had some ‘opportunity to move between the lines’, and had had access to higher education and employment. Most of them found jobs as soon as they received residence permits. They felt that ‘they did not waste any time in their new country’, and that being active from the beginning helped them to deal with their past experiences and to settle into a new life much more quickly.

The women that arrived after 1990 were subjected to a prolonged stay in asylum seeker centers for up to four years whilst their claim was being considered. During this time they were not allowed to work, learn the language or engage with members of Dutch society. The complete isolation from social life made it very difficult for refugees to deal with the traumatic memories of their past life, and the conditions of living such segregated, structured lives made the ‘majority lose motivation and passion for a new start after years of frustration’. Being separated from society and being forced to be passive made people more dependent, ‘dependency builds dependency....people who have spent years living as dependents of the state find it difficult to live independently later’, and for many living the early years in such a controlled environment resulted in ‘a loss of self-image as independent and active people’, which did not help them to rebuild their lives once they received residence permits (ibid).

These studies show that, separation through high levels of state control or rigid structural barriers means that members of the host society and refugees have little opportunity to socialize. Experiences are not shared, because there is very little scope in society for them to mix, very little scope for the sharing of personal experiences, forming friendships and close personal ties. Where approaches to integration are more open and less state-controlled, there is more scope for refugees to mix with host communities, tell their stories, and share their experiences.

The highly state controlled reception strategy that the British government seems to have adopted is in direct contrast to recent debates of integration which highlight the importance of a more personal approach. A qualitative study for the Home Office (Ager and Strang, 2004a), researched the experiences of integration in Islington and Pollokshaws, of both host communities and refugees. For both groups issues such as safety and stability, language, and advice and cultural understanding were of extreme importance. In addition, the findings strongly suggested that personal relationships were crucial to establishing a sense of belonging, and a feeling of being integrated. For some, relationships meant feeling welcome and experiencing friendliness, but for others it meant having committed friendships, some refugees would speak of their English or Scottish friends with a sense of pride, and emphasized the significance of sharing their culture with others (Ager and Strang, 2004a: 9-10).

The findings of this study have added a personal dimension to the perhaps more formal, structural definition of integration, which has been included in the government's *Indicators of Integration* (Ager and Strang, 2004b) framework, where an individual or

group is considered integrated when they achieve similar outcomes to the wider population in areas such as employment, housing, or health, engage confidently with wider society on the level of language, culture, and citizenship, and have social relationships with members of their own community as well as with members of other communities.

To conclude, the overall official approach towards refugee settlement at present seems very contradictory. On the one hand it involves the idea that a personal dimension must be included in an overall strategy for refugee integration, whilst on the other hand, the state controlled arrival and settlement strategies for asylum seekers leads to a complete segregation between claimants and members of the host population, which as several studies have shown prevents people from mixing on a personal level, sharing their experiences and finding a potential audience for their stories. Furthermore, it does not help people to integrate at social, economic or personal level, or develop a sense of belonging. However, this contradiction does reflect the government strategy of severely controlling the entry of asylum seekers, whilst also encouraging the immigration of skilled migrants, as long as new migrant communities fit the integration and social cohesion framework.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the different strands of a network of power relations that shape the sharing of personal refugee stories in the public domain. It has unravelled the dominant social and political narratives through which refugee lives are lived and told, and how such narratives manipulate the public mind in Britain into an audience that is

unreceptive to personal refugee stories. Prevailing dominant images tell us that rapid political and social changes on a global scale are causing millions of people to be on the move, whilst in receiving states, political and economic ideologies are changing, and ‘grand narratives’, or traditional frameworks of meaning, ‘are being swept aside’ (Denzin, 1991: 5; see also Plummer, 1995: 144).

These developments have resulted in a greater sense of insecurity amongst the members of host communities. The presence of refugees and migrants makes them feel anxious about global changes, and also about their own lives. The project of the democratic nation-state, this beacon of security, is being challenged by those who do not find economic wellbeing or protection by their own state. Refugee stories are permeated by experiences of war, conflict, violence and trauma, and are a reminder of the grim insecurities of a late modern, globalised world.

Since members of host populations are confronted more and more with the insecurities of a globalised world, they are also more open to powerful narratives that will engender a sense of belonging and security. Therefore, a web of narratives about refugees, including the narrative of a ‘safe haven’, the idea of the ‘other’ as a scapegoat for society’s problems, confusion about economic migrants, and issues pertaining to integration and social cohesion, fulfills the need of continuing to create a ‘narrative of the nation’ (Hall, 2000: 182-184), and a sense of belonging and security. However, it also shapes public perception to the extent that they are impermeable to the personal stories of refugees.

Individual refugee stories need to be told within integrated and cohesive communities in order for those who tell the stories to make sense of the political and social histories and

contexts that have changed their lives. Although historically many refugees have settled in this country, it remains difficult for their stories to find communities willing to listen. For the moment, despite the opening up of spaces in British society where experiences can be shared, including the recent focus on the ‘personal’ in integration debates, the current network of power relations surrounding refugee stories strongly maintains the lack of a space, or a platform where personal refugee stories can be told, thus denying them the opportunity for personal empowerment and political redress.

It remains difficult for refugees and the public to communicate and share experiences, and for such tales to find an audience because there is no ‘narrative framework’ (Kushner, 2006) in which to do so. In many ways the public as a potential audience behaves as ‘bystanders’, who are people who know of the suffering of others, but choose not to react, because their attitudes are manipulated by a culture of denial (Cohen, 2000: 140–145). Eastmond highlights the urgency with which we need to attempt to open up spaces where refugee experiences can be shared, especially because ‘solidarity with refugees in their plight appears to be giving way to distrust in many parts of the world’ (2007: 261). British society not only lacks a national narrative framework for refugee experiences, a space where refugees’ experiences can be shared and remembered, at present the public seems completely impermeable as an audience for such stories, and it seems unlikely that a narrative framework will be emerging in the foreseeable future.

In an attempt to unravel the complex web of narratives about refugees, and investigate how refugees make sense of the changes in their lives, the next part of this thesis will turn its attention to the personal narratives contributed to this study through life story

interviews with a number of refugees. An in-depth analysis of the life stories of individual refugees facilitates the de-construction of the web of narratives that currently represents dominant perceptions and knowledge about refugees (Eastmond, 2007: 253). It is beyond the scope of this study to tell each of the participants' life stories from beginning to end, or to provide an in-depth discussion of each of their lives. However, it has been my intention from the onset of this research study to analyse and interpret the life stories from the perspective of the individual, within a social, political and policy context, and to include a multitude of voices. Therefore the following three chapters will present the personal narratives contributed to this study as a 'map' of refugee lives (Plummer, 2000), which embraces a myriad of fragmented episodes, and is capable of capturing the diversity of experiences that make up refugee lives.

Chapter Five

A BRICOLAGE OF REFUGEE EXPERIENCES, A MAP OF REFUGEE LIVES

Introduction

In a society which has witnessed a narrative turn, a social world where stories can be told and listened to, an intricate web of narratives, underpinned by an elaborate network of power relations, constructs refugees through a state-centred perspective, portraying them as ‘passive victims’, and the threatening ‘other’. As argued in previous chapters, raised levels of insecurity amongst members of the host society are closely related to a changing paradigm of asylum, which involves a highly increased control of borders, and the erosion of rights in countries of asylum. These changes have generated amplified levels of public hostility towards refugees and other migrants, and have enabled host populations to link their sense of insecurity about a globalised world with refugee and migratory events. This complex web of narratives which portrays refugees as the ‘other’, as well as the impenetrability of the British public as an audience for refugee stories, has resulted in a *silence* surrounding individual refugee lives. Paradoxically, in this *storytelling society*, the personal stories that refugees can tell of their experiences are rarely told and seldom heard.

In this chapter I will present refugee stories as narratives that tell of a diverse range of experiences. It is through the telling of their individual stories that refugees make sense of the changes in their lives, and of their place in this rapidly changing world.

Furthermore, the diversity inherent in narratives of personal refugee experiences has the potential to challenge the perception of refugee lives as a ‘uniform condition’, and the notion of refugees as an ‘undifferentiated, essentialised and universal category’ (Eastmond, 2007: 253).

A Diversity of Experiences

In ‘an implicit functionalist model of society’ (Malkki, 1995: 508) sedentariness is considered the norm, and refugee lives are constructed as an abnormality, an irregularity in a stable and secure society³⁸. In this context, Stein (1981) outlines the specific stages of ‘the refugee experience’³⁹ and presents a refugee story as a definitive and ultimate representation of a refugee. More recently, Hynes (2003: 2-3) used Baker’s (1990: 67) eight-phase model to describe the different phases of involuntary migration, which entails: ‘the period of threat; the decision to flee; in flight; reaching safety and a place of asylum; the refugee camp experience; reception into a host country; resettlement; and post-resettlement’, thereby creating categories to facilitate the understanding of refugee lives (in Hynes, 2003).

However, Stein’s classification and Baker’s conceptualisation of refugees carry the danger of disregarding the ‘extraordinarily diverse historical and political causes’ of their individual situation. For Malkki the term ‘refugee’ is only useful as a ‘broad legal or descriptive rubric that includes within it a world of different socioeconomic statuses, personal histories, and psychological or spiritual situations’, and is only one feature ‘of

³⁸ Please see chapter three for a more detailed discussion of the notion of the ‘refugee’ as problematic in relation to the development of the nation-state

³⁹ Stein (1981) argues the specific stages of the refugee experience are: ‘perception of a threat; decision to flee; period of extreme danger and flight; reaching safety; camp behavior; repatriation; settlement or resettlement; adjustment and acculturation; and residual states and changes in behavior caused by the experience’

much larger constellations of socio-political and cultural processes and practices' (1995: 496). Others have also pointed out the dangers of categorising individual experiences, and have argued that 'by emphasising the common experience and common needs of forced migrants, we risk seeing them as a homogeneous mass of needy and passive victims' (Turton, 2003: 7).

Furthermore, as the following chapters will demonstrate, refugee stories do not consist of a cycle of events that is typical of refugee life. One comprehensive narrative attempting to describe a refugee life as a 'common refugee experience' would struggle to encompass the diverse range of factors that motivate flight, the many different kinds of journeys that people make, and the many different places of arrival, where people find difficult, but also imaginative ways to re-build their lives. Consequently, there is not one image of a person that exemplifies the meaning of who constitutes a refugee:

[T]here is no intrinsic, paradigmatic refugee figure to be at once recognised and registered regardless of historical contingencies. Instead, it could be argued there are a thousand multifarious refugee experiences and a thousand refugee figures whose meanings and identities are negotiated in the processes of displacement in time and place (Soguk, 1999: 4; see also Turton, 2003: 7).

Another approach which supports this conceptualisation of refugee experiences is to be found in the concept of refugeeness (Lacroix, 2004), which means understanding that the refugee experience is only universal in the sense that those who are refugees share the experiences of crossing borders, being uprooted and forced to flee their country, which constitutes just one 'irreversible element in the construction of their present subjectivity' (ibid: 148). Lacroix quotes Amina Mama to explain that '[t]here is no universal subject but only particular subjectivities and subjects that are located in discourses – and so in the

social spheres...’ (1995: 98, in Lacroix, 2004), by which she means that refugeeness is a particular social construction in relation to specific social, political and legal settings.

Refugees as ‘Capable Agents’

Thinking of refugees as ‘passive, needy victims’ is part of the wider framework of representing a ‘common refugee experience’ (Turton, 2003: 7). This framework presents refugees as helpless victims, who depend on compassion amongst host populations to provide them with a livelihood (Harrell-Bond, 1999: 147; see also Ghorashi, 2005: 185). From this perspective it is inevitable that refugees come to be seen as a burden on society, and as a ‘category of people’ who need to depend on the welfare of governments and others, and who are therefore considered a ‘burden on their host societies’ (Ghorashi, 2005: 185). Although it is important to realise that refugees are often victims of violence, this does not imply that they will be helpless in all other areas of their lives, and it does not justify the image of the ‘helpless refugee’ (Turton, 2003: 7).

This study has adopted an activist approach (Lofland and Lofland, 1995: 145-148) to studying refugee lives, which takes human agency as a starting point, and considers people as ‘creative and probing creatures who are coping, dealing, designating, dodging, manoeuvring, scheming, striving, struggling, and so forth – that is as creatures who are actively influencing their social settings’. Robinson and Segrott (2002), in their study into the decision making processes involved when refugees choose to flee their countries of origin, acknowledge that making decisions is not a wholly rational activity. However, they also recognize that refugees are not ‘passive victims propelled around the world by external forces’ (Kunz, 1973; in Robinson and Segrott, 2002).

As an alternative, they perceive refugees as ‘active agents’, people who have been forced to leave their home countries, but who are capable of finding information, making contacts, and organizing flight. Furthermore, the idea of migration as purely ‘forced’, without any participation of the refugee, ignores the notion that refugees may have had some ‘choice’ in the course of events, may have made some decisions in the process of becoming a refugee. Overlooking the refugees’ ability to make choices and decisions, however limited, carries the assumption that refugees cannot possibly be agents (Turton, 2003: 7). In this context, Robinson and Segrott (2002) believe that ‘flight’ should not be seen as a ‘single event’, but as a course of action embedded within the particular circumstances of the individual’s life course. Therefore, as well as exploring the diversity of experiences that constitute refugee stories, this chapter will provide an insight into how refugees made sense of their lives within the situation in their home countries, and how their circumstances led them to make the decision to flee, thereby demonstrating their capacity for rational action.

Becoming a Refugee: Participants and their Life Stories

In the narrative interviews I asked participants to tell me the stories of how they became refugees, in their own words. If an interviewee needed prompting, I told them they could tell me the experiences of life in their home country, the journeys they made, and of making a new life in Britain. These were not meant as rigid categories, but as a loosely organised sequence of events, which would remain flexible enough to encompass a diversity of refugee experiences. As a result, the following part of the chapter is not a single refugee narrative, but a bricolage that embodies the variety of experiences that comprise individual refugee lives.

The narratives portrayed in this chapter will firstly outline the life in the home country of four refugees. It will examine the events which forced them to make the decision to leave, and observe the extent to which the refugees themselves were ‘capable agents’ in making these decisions. The discussion will then turn to the journeys made by five refugees, thereby investigating how leaving one’s home country, and handing the reins of one’s life course over into the hands of someone else, may cause a sense of dependence and helplessness. The chapter will end by considering the situation that three different refugees found themselves in upon arrival in Britain⁴⁰. The early arrival period is often characterised by confusion and chaos, and yet it is during this time that refugees have to immediately claim asylum, organise accommodation, face a society in which they do not speak the language, and are often confronted with suspicion, disbelief and hostility.

Situation in the Home Country: Making the Decision to Flee

Not all participants told me the in-depth story of how and why they left their countries. I employed an interviewing strategy which encouraged them to tell me about the experiences of events that were important to them, loosely organised around the themes leaving the home country, journey, making a new life in Britain. Some told me most about the political situation in their country, and others mostly about their housing situation in Britain, or primarily about their families. The narratives below are my interpretations of the sequence of events and how the participants came to make the decisions they did. I found that the narrative strategy used by the people I interviewed followed a pattern of outlining the socio-political situation in the home country broadly

⁴⁰ Each of the sections in the chapter (situation in the home country, journeys, arrival in Britain) is made up of segments of different participants’ contributions

and historically, then narrowing down the narrative to explain how this situation affected their community, their family or employment, and ending this part of the life story with a personal, individual dimension such as their role or activity within specific political, social and/or historical settings. Once participants had moved the story to the self within this wider context, their narratives offered an insight into how they made the decision to flee. The use of analytical tools such as ‘narrative knowing’, whereby experiences are transformed into narrative form, and the ‘epiphany’, which indicates a significant moment, or a turning point in one’s life, are useful in illuminating the process of decision making in leaving one’s home country in political turmoil, and thus interpret refugee stories as accounts told by decision making agents.

Ruben: Surviving in a War Zone

I was introduced to Ruben by a participant who I had already interviewed. We had a few conversations on the phone about the study, and about what was expected of him during the life story interview. When I arrived, Ruben seemed quite organised and prepared to share his experiences.

In listening to Ruben’s story very carefully, it becomes evident that the process of ‘narrative knowing’ does not happen in circumstances where the individual finds it difficult to accept events that are occurring in and through wider social and political processes. Ruben found it difficult to make sense of what happened to him. He could not weave wider political processes into the individual narrative of his life or that of his family, and for the first few weeks did not know what to do. He started his story by telling me that he arrived at Heathrow Airport on 7 August 1992, after a few months of

surviving the extreme circumstances of violent conflict whilst his town in Bosnia was occupied by the Serbian army. In early 1992, Ruben had just graduated from University, and started teaching English in a Secondary school in his hometown. His first daughter had just been born in December 1991. He described how they gradually became aware of the conflicts that surrounded them:

[W]e could hear fighting across the river in Croatia. It was a very, obviously, unsettling environment... we tried to lead normal lives, you know, a young family starting, work just starting, we had a baby just born. But the reports from Croatia, and then in early 1992 from Sarajevo and some other small towns in Bosnia, there were some reports of fighting and sometimes paramilitary activity, and obviously we were very concerned....when we were walking out there was a terrible explosion...There were two bridges on the river, the Serbian army blew them up to prevent the Croat army from crossing them...and advanced on the town, there wasn't much resistance, and there was a lot of panic (Ref 3).

Ruben found the breaking up of Yugoslavia, and the separation of the different nations very confusing, and was not sure how to make sense of his own life against this background:

A lot of political happenings...for example the election, when the Nationalist Party won the election, they really started to argue a lot, and they couldn't resolve their differences in a peaceful way....The big confusion was that we didn't know, you know we were brought up in a socialist society where the president Tito was the main figure and we were kind of in a way brainwashed to believe that he is the leader. In this socialist society, I really generally I wasn't aware whether my best friend was Serb, or Croat, or Muslim. I was totally not aware of that until that started happening, and suddenly there were all these differences (Ref 3).

He continued his discussion with describing how the Serbs took over his hometown, how he felt about the war and the fighting, and how he remained unaware of a 'separation' of different nationalities:

From the moment they took over the radio station, and announced ‘you are under occupation’, and then asking all men report to the barracks to fight, you know, first they said men of **all** nations, but then they correct, and then there was separation, something I was totally unaware of...I would have probably gone to war for Tito, but not for all these new nationalist parties starting, fighting among themselves, I didn’t feel it was my war if you like, it was very confusing (Ref 3).

What Ruben is telling us here, is that he could not engage the experience of the war into the process of ‘narrative knowing’. He could not weave the narrative of ‘separate nations at war’ into his own personal story. He indicates quite clearly that he was brought up in a socialist society where he was totally unaware of the different ethnic backgrounds of people, and refused to believe otherwise. That is why he claims he might have gone to war for Tito, but can not identify himself with any of the factions that have emerged as part of the break up of Yugoslavia. There are other refugees from the Bosnian region, who described their feelings about this war in a similar way:

I didn’t know what to do if I had to be a soldier – I did not want to fight and kill, it was nonsense. I realised that I was not able to kill. I felt that this war was not mine (in Grouev, 2000).

The statements from the above refugee ‘I felt this war was not mine’ and from Ruben that he may have ‘gone to war for Tito, but not for all these new nationalist parties starting, fighting among themselves’, demonstrate that they felt it was not their war, and they are similar in that they both indicate that they could not make the war a part of their ‘narrative knowing’.

Being caught in a city under siege, Ruben and his young family were very scared, and didn’t know what to do. In search of safety whilst the town was under attack, they moved a few times into different accommodation:

We moved to a traditionally Bosnian Muslim part of town, where my uncle had a house, and we stayed there, whereas our flat was in the traditionally Serbian part of town, relatively safe, even in the beginning of the war. So that was the worst days when we were waiting to see what would happen (Ref 3).

Soon after they moved to this flat the paramilitaries occupied the building. Ruben and his family, including his parents, were terrified, because they had heard reports of the paramilitaries killing people in other towns, and they could also hear the soldiers talking in the corridors. They did not know what to expect, there was a lot of shelling from the building, and a lot of fighting out in the streets, and they experienced a very 'scary' night. The next morning, they thought they couldn't stay where they were, and they also realized that they could not look after the baby, and they took the risk of asking the soldiers to help them across town to their own apartment:

...in the early hours of the next morning, the baby didn't have any nappies, and food, she was crying. So we asked, my wife was there, my mother, father, myself and the baby. So we asked the soldiers to try and transfer us to our flat, across town. We were lucky I suppose. So they arranged for us, for a car to arrive, in front of the building, there was still a lot of shooting around. We sat in the car, but there was no place for my father. I'll always remember that, because I sat with the baby, my wife, my mother and two soldiers in the front. There was no place for my father, but I recognize this soldier, he went to primary school with me, he recognized me the night before. So he happened to be there with his car, and I asked him, 'please take my father and can you follow us' and he did...the danger was that they would take us to the barracks, and that was dangerous, because who knows, we would go to camps, concentration camps and so on (Ref 3).

For about three months Ruben and his family hid in their flat. They were supported by Serbian neighbours who were sympathetic and helped with food and information:

I always say, you can not divide the whole nation, it was probably the Serbian neighbours who saved our lives. But those who joined the Army also became a bit extremist if you like, committing crimes against Bosnians, you know. You never knew if someone would be helpful or against you...[W]e managed to survive a very difficult two and a half months. We couldn't concentrate, we couldn't sleep

at night, fighting was very near, and you never knew when a grenade or bullet could come through a window or in the building it was very scary couple of months (Ref 3).

Whilst hiding out in their flat, the circumstances forced them to think about leaving the war zone:

...basically all the stories from the front, and trying to survive for a couple of months, we were looking for ways to leave the war zone (Ref 3).

Their Serbian neighbours, and even a Serbian priest helped with advice, places to hide, and by taking their identity papers to the police to try and obtain a pass to leave the war zone. On the day that they were supposed to receive the travel documents, the Serbs came to the block where they lived, searching for Bosnians. A Serbian neighbour hid Ruben from the soldiers, until they left. It was the Serbian priest who managed to get the permission to leave the town from the police, and then they were ready to leave:

They gave us the pass to leave the town. The next morning we got on the early bus, the only bus that was from my hometown to Belgrade (Ref 3).

In Belgrade they stayed in the flat of Ruben's grandparents, but it was difficult to stay there for a long period of time. There was no work, they were refugees, and it was difficult to survive there as well. He visited the British Embassy, to find out about claiming asylum in Britain, but he was told that the UK does not recognize refugees.

Ruben then wrote to a friend he knew in Britain:

I wrote to the only person I knew here in England, in Staines, asking for information on how to come to UK, and she didn't know at first, but she found out about refugees. She went to a refugee project at Heathrow, and that was interesting, because when I went to English embassy in Belgrade during the early months of the war, and asked for information on whether we could go to the UK as refugees, the woman there said no, UK doesn't recognize refugees at all, you

have no chance going there. That was disappointing but then see I got this letter from this lady, I found out about RAP (Refugees Arrivals Project) and they told me that we could come to UK and claim asylum, that we would be ‘genuine’ refugees (ref 3).

They could not fly to the UK from Belgrade, since there was a UN embargo on flights from Belgrade at the time. Ruben and his family travelled into Macedonia, and organized flights from there. They arrived at Heathrow on 7 August 1992.

Initially Ruben found it difficult to make decisions about his situation, and in the early of Serb occupation of his hometown he was hiding with his family, not knowing what to do. However, once he made the war in Bosnia part of his life story, through the process of ‘narrative knowing’, and accepted what was happening, he became very capable and proactive in making decisions, organizing flight, and even anticipating their arrival and procedures for claiming asylum in Britain. In this context Ruben’s story is permeated by elements of both victimhood and a capacity for agency.

Abbas: Story of Kurdish Oppression

Abbas is a Kurdish man from Iraq, who worked in a high street shop local to where I lived, and I knew him for a while before I started this study. He was always very open about his experiences, and very encouraging and supportive about my work. He came to the UK in 1995 by himself, and his wife and son followed him in 1998. Abbas is the kind of person who always has a positive outlook on life, he whistles or sings whilst he is working, chats and makes jokes with all his customers, and has time for everyone. And yet he has some extremely traumatic experiences, and had to leave Iraq under quite distressing circumstances. In telling his life story Abbas adopts the narrative strategy of

broadly outlining the socio-political history of the Kurds in Iraq, moving on to tell me of his family, and then situating his personal story within this broad narrative.

He started the life story interview by telling me about Saddam Hussein's regime, and the situation of the Kurds in Iraq:

In 1979 Saddam Hussein came to power. And then in 1980 there was a war between Iraq and Iran. The Kurdish people, on both sides live near the border. They were right in the middle.....The Iraqi government, they do not treat Kurds well. In 1988 the Iraqi government destroyed many Kurdish villages⁴¹, they killed more than one hundred thousand people. They bombed the villages with chemical weapons, many fled to the mountains. They did this to show power, and also so that Kurdish rebels would not have food and other resources (Ref 4).

Right from the onset he succeeds in embedding his life in the political history of Iraq, telling about government change, and the war with Iran, whilst also directly linking the plight of the Kurds, the ethnic group he belongs to, into these processes. He continues his story by connecting politics to his family situation:

I come from a politically active family. My father, he was very political. They (the Iraqi secret police) killed my parents and my brother. When I finished University, I joined the opposition, I became a member of the Kurdish political party, and went to the Kurdish region to teach the children (Ref 4).

Abbas links his family's political activity, and the fact they are Kurdish, to the wider political and social processes in Iraq, and to his decision to join the Kurdish political party. His story then moves to discussing the practice of oppressing the Kurds in Iraq,

⁴¹ In 1988, Iraqi government forces systematically targeted Kurdish villages and killed civilians. Amnesty International estimates that over 100,000 Kurds were killed or disappeared during 1987-1988, in an operation known as the Anfal campaigns, to suppress Kurdish rebellion. The campaign included the use of chemical weapons. According to Human Rights Watch, a single attack on the Kurdish town of Halabja killed up to 5,000 civilians and injured some 10,000 more (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2002)

and describes how the Iraqi government forbids Kurdish language, and cultural and religious practices:

Then, the Iraqi government closed Kurdish schools, they forbade our language to be spoken, forbade our religion and our music. It was not allowed. We would sometimes listen to Kurdish music, with a few people, sitting underneath a blanket (giggles), but this is dangerous (Ref 4).

And again, from painting a broader political picture of social life in Iraq for the Kurds, he indicates how this affects him personally, by talking about secretly listening to Kurdish music. Gradually, the story becomes more about his personal life, how he is both affected by, and involved in, wider political and social processes, and it moves towards the reason that made him leave his country:

In 1992, I worked for six months as a volunteer for the UNHCR, mainly distributing food to the refugee camps. And then, from 1992 to 1994 I worked as a volunteer for CARE⁴², an Australian international aid organization. For this reason, because I did this work, the Iraqi government saw me as a spy. They are very suspicious, always looking for spies.... It was too dangerous, I had to leave. My life was in danger (ref 4).

Abbas describes the situation of the Kurdish people in Iraq, how they are treated by the Iraqi government. He situates the plight of his politically active family and his role in the Kurdish community in that context. He describes quite eloquently the situation in his country for his people, his role as a volunteer, and how that endangered his life, and indicates he rationally decided to leave because his life was in danger. Abbas planned his journey, together with fellow travelers:

⁴² For more information please see www.careaustralia.org.au

Once I decided to leave, I needed identity papers. We also had to plan how we would walk, and where to go. We decided the best would be to go to Ankara, because there you can find people to smuggle you (Ref 4).

Abbas became quite emotional, and his story became more erratic when he discussed the sequence of events prior to him leaving Iraq. Despite this, he clearly describes how he organized his departure, thinking about which destination would be best for organizing further travel. I would argue that Abbas was forced out of his homeland through external forces over which he had no control. Nevertheless, in this context, he also managed to make some decisions about his life circumstances, by deciding to leave and organizing flight.

Hameed: the Kurdish Political Struggle

Abbas introduced me to Hameed, who worked in the local shop with him. Hameed also was very interested in my study, and willing to tell me his story. Hameed came to Britain in 1986, and the first thing he told me was, *I am now a British citizen, not a refugee anymore* (Ref 5), and then continued to sketch an image of Iran as a country made up of many different ethnic groups:

There are six million Kurds in Iran.. In the West of Iran, Iran has multi-nations, Turks, Beluchi, Arabs, Farsi (Persian), and Kurds, plus some more, smaller groups (Ref 5).

From the first time I met him, he always emphasized the Kurdish cause as a political struggle. He gave a very elaborate and in-depth account of the political history of the Kurdish people in Iran:

On the 22nd January 2000, it was the 55 years celebration of Kurdish Republic, it was founded in 22 January 1945. The Allies were in Iran in 1945, you know in

the West they fought against Hitler, the British and Russians. The Allies and the Kurds established the Kurdish Republic for 11 months, until the Allies left. The Iranian government then overthrew this (Ref 5).

He also explained the political objectives of Kurdish politics in Iran very well:

Kurds struggle for freedom, not for independence, but for equality, democracy. Struggle for democracy and autonomy for the past 21 years, since Shah has gone, and Khomeini brought Islamic Republic (Ref 5).

In describing the political history of the Kurdish people in Iran, he needs a long time before he discusses his role, and his own life story in relation to the wider context. From telling me about the Kurdish people, he moves to telling me what happened to Kurdish political leaders, as they were traveling around Europe in order to gain support for their cause:

On 13 July 1989, the Kurdish leader Dr. Ghassemlou⁴³, who was Secretary General of Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iran (PKDI), was assassinated in Vienna with two colleagues, whilst they were at the negotiation table. They were killed by Iranian intelligence service (Ref 5)

Although Hameed felt very sad for the Austrian authorities, and told me that one Austrian person was injured, he was not so impressed with the way they handled the situation. He claims that the Austrian police arrested the intelligence soldiers, and then sent them back to Iran. Hameed describes this as bad of the Austrians (Ref 5). He then recalled another incident involving a prominent Kurdish politician:

On the 17 September 1992, the Secretary General of PKDI, Dr. Sadegh Sharafkandi, was killed in a restaurant in Germany (Ref 5).

⁴³ For more information about Dr. Ghassemlou or the PKDI, please visit www.pkdi.org

This time however, he emphasized that the way in which the German authorities handled this incident helped to acknowledge the oppressive situation of the Kurds, and the effect this had on the ‘Kurdish struggle’:

For the first time in Europe, the German court and part of their government, arrested the killers and imprisoned them. This had a huge effect on Kurdish struggle, it emphasized the Kurdish aims, democracy, freedom, negotiation, and it raised the question: Who is the terrorist (Ref 5)?

It was very important for Hameed to clarify his individual actions as political, and politically justified. He needed to emphasize the incident in Germany, that the image of the Kurds had changed from perceived ‘terrorists’ to an ‘oppressed people’, before he would narrow down his narrative from historical and political processes to his own personal life story. And even when he eluded to his involvement, he would not literally claim that he had been involved in armed struggle. When he started to tell me, firstly he repeated that the Kurdish had not wanted armed struggle, that they would have preferred democratic negotiations:

The solution for the Kurdish people was not to succeed in arms struggle, but to negotiate with the governments who invaded Kurdistan. Negotiate with governments in Baghdad, Teheran and Ankara. But these governments, they do not trust the Kurds, do not want to negotiate.

Having established that the Kurds tried to negotiate with the Turkish, Iraqi, and Iranian governments, but failed to gain a voice in this way, he finally described his own involvement, but manages very well to circumvent a clear description of what exactly happened:

In Iran, I was involved in politics, mostly in PDKI, the political party, until 1986. It became dangerous in Iran for me, you see, in the Kurdish struggle, we try to

negotiate, but it was difficult, and the PDKI struggle was an armed struggle. Then it was not easy to stay over there. Perhaps the people who were not in Kurdish armed struggle, perhaps they can stay there. I was involved in army, I had responsibilities in the area, it was dangerous, I could not stay (Ref 5).

Hameed did not tell me any further detail of his political activities, and I did not press him into doing so. In a way I felt he found his activities quite difficult to accept, and could only rationalize them in the language of the PDKI. Some of the phrases he used to tell me his story resonate very closely the rhetoric of the PDKI, and of Dr. Ghassemlou:

A nation that seeks freedom shall also pay its price. No nation without struggle and great effort, without sacrificing its valuable youth has attained freedom. Kurdish nation, and our Party, as the forerunner of the Kurdish national struggle, understands that freedom requires devotion and self-sacrifice; our martyrs' caravan is long, and it might even be longer than that (Dr. Ghassemlou⁴⁴)

It is a language that legitimates violent action:

Our struggle is a legitimate cause; it is the struggle for the liberty of a nation; struggle for the future of our children and the coming generations (ibid).

As with Abbas, the story of Hameed begins broadly, with the historical/political situation of the Kurdish people in Iran. For Hameed it was very important to emphasize the political struggle of the Kurds. He situates his individual life story against the background of the assassination of prominent members of the PDKI, and the acknowledgement within Europe of the Kurds as oppressed people rather than terrorists. Hameed's activities and the decisions he made can be interpreted as the intertwining of his personal narrative with the language of the PDKI.

⁴⁴ For speeches and/or interviews with Dr. Ghassemlou please visit http://www.pdki.org/articles.php?lang=1&cat_id=71&article_id=711&PHPSESSID=3f8e7d5548745b14032cb9fbc66b52c0

Miranda: Witnessing Violence

Miranda is a young woman from Kosovo, who arrived in Britain with her husband in the spring of 1999. Miranda described their life in Kosovo as ‘beautiful’, they lived and worked on their family farm, where they kept sheep and other animals. As many of the other participants, Miranda started her story with a little lesson in history, thereby demonstrating her knowledge of the politico-historical background of her country’s situation in quite some depth:

In Kosovo, we are the same people as in Albania, we speak the same language, have the same culture, the same traditions. Before 1914, all this part of Europe belonged to the Austrian-Hungarian empire, after 1918, many different little states were put together to form Yugoslavia (Ref 6).

After this introduction she continued the story of the break-up of Yugoslavia, bringing it up to the moment that her life, and that of her family was affected:

In my country there was war. The Serbs invaded Kosovo...They burned my house, they sent us away, half of all Kosovan people were sent to camps. We had to leave everything, then they burnt everything, houses, animals (Ref 6).

Miranda briefly told me how they were targeted by the Serbs, and how the violence influenced their decision to flee to safety:

They thought my husband was in the Kosovan army, but he was not.⁴⁵ He just protested...In the protests, the fighting, I saw so much blood. They beat my cousin to death with a gun.⁴⁶ He was only 22, they beat him with a gun (Ref6)

⁴⁵ The Kosovan Liberation Army (KLA, in Kosovo it is called UCK). For information about the origins, and controversial activities of the KLA please visit www.globalsecurity.org

⁴⁶ Miranda acted out how they beat her cousin to death, she used her arms as if holding a gun, to tell me ‘not like this’ as if shooting, ‘but like this’, then pretended to be beating someone with the gun. After showing me this, she cried.

Miranda was very scared, and together with her husband decided to leave Kosovo. They contacted her brother, who had come to Britain two years earlier:

My brother came here in 1997, because he did not want to serve in the Serb army. He wanted us to come here too, because it would be safer (Ref 6).

Once they decided to try to come to Britain, they needed to gather sufficient funds, and find smugglers who would take them. They finally managed to flee Kosovo in April 1999:

We found smugglers, we had to pay them 6,000DM, it is a lot of money. We had help from family. Then we came to England by lorry with many other refugees, it took two weeks. We left 1 April 1999, we came illegally. They would sometimes let us out, but I never knew where we were, I was scared (Ref 6).

Upon arrival in Britain they claimed asylum. When I met Miranda, they lived in a one bed-sit in South London with their young child. Miranda suffered anxiety attacks for a long time, and never left the house by herself. She was always accompanied by her husband, or a member of his family, who also always did most of the shopping.

Miranda began her story by describing their life in Kosovo as 'beautiful'. She then discussed the violence she witnessed, and the fear she felt. Miranda and her husband were forced to flee Kosovo because of violence and ethnic conflict. Although severely traumatized, with help from family, they managed to gather enough money, find smugglers, and organize flight out of the region. In this context, I would argue that Miranda's life story contains elements of both passivity and the capacity for agency.

The aim of this chapter was to explore which events forced refugees to make the decision to leave, and examine the extent to which they themselves were 'capable agents' in

making these decisions. The narratives of Ruben, Abbas, Hameed, and Miranda demonstrate that their life stories are closely embedded in the social, historical and political settings of their home-countries. In their interpretation of their own lives, they all rationalised their individual situation within this wider context, thereby acknowledging that they were ‘forced’ to make the decision to flee. However, I believe that although all four participants were ‘forced’ to make the decision to flee, they had to be quite pro-active in making the decision to leave their homeland, and demonstrated their capacity for agency in that they managed to gather enough money, organised flight, and (either with or without help) planned their departure and journey.

Journeys into the Unknown: Extreme Courage or Complete Helplessness?

Once refugees have made the decision to flee, they embark on a journey of which they do not necessarily know the outcome. The journeys that refugees make comprise of a little known part of refugee life. In Britain, as an audience for many different dominant refugee narratives, we are aware of the images of the 434 Afghan refugees aboard the Tampa, who had been rescued from their sinking boat in the Indian Ocean. We probably remember the scenes of Vietnamese refugees in little boats during the 1980s⁴⁷, and the horrific event of the 58 bodies of Chinese migrants found in the back of a refrigerated truck at Dover.⁴⁸ More recently, and as mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, there have been stories in the news of migrants traveling in boats from Africa to the Canary Islands, or traveling across the Sahara into Libya in an attempt to reach Europe.

⁴⁷ One participant and her daughter traveled with 37 others by boat from Vietnam to Singapore. She followed her husband who had also traveled by boat, and had arrived in Thailand (Ref 10).

⁴⁸ ‘58 bodies found in back of truck at Dover’ in *The Independent on Sunday* 19 June 2000

Other than these quite horrific images, some studies, although not explicitly engaging with the journeys that refugees make, do present some knowledge on how, if at all, people decide on destinations. For example, Robinson and Segrott (2002: 5) suggest a number of factors that determine the journeys refugees make, and the options for destinations that refugees have. Often people are forced to flee at very short notice, and there will be very little scope for planning the journeys. Access to financial resources and travel documents are also important, as is the accessibility of countries of destination in terms of visa restrictions and border control. Finally, refugees often pay ‘agents’ or smugglers to assist them in their flight, which means that many refugees have no choice in where they are taken, and frequently do not even know the destination of their journey. Other studies support the findings that refugees who arrive in countries of asylum often have no prior knowledge of their destination during flight, and their plight is in the hands of agents (Middleton, 2005; Gilbert and Khoser, 2006).

The participants in this study were not asked many questions during their life story interviews, I merely asked them to tell me in their own words how they came to be refugees, how they travelled to Britain, and how they managed when they arrived here. As stated in the methodology chapter, I was very careful not to use terms such as ‘country of destination’, ‘settlement’ or ‘integration’, because I felt such terms would be very laden with meaning, and I wanted the participants to tell me of the experiences that were important to them. As a result, some of the stories contributed to this study told mostly of the political situation in the home country, some were just about the Home Office, and others discussed situations of housing or health services in Britain. A number

of people gave in-depth accounts of the journeys they made, and I was quite surprised at the tremendous diversity of experiences people described.

A few refugees told me, using almost entirely similar phrases, about the sense of helplessness and dependence they felt during their journeys, whilst others were very courageous in the face of sometimes extreme danger. In the following part of this chapter I have analysed the journeys that some of the participants made as a *narrative of dependence*, a *narrative of courage*, and a *narrative of struggling for legality*.

A Narrative of Dependence

Throughout this thesis, and in the beginning of this chapter, I have adhered to the notion of refugees as ‘active agents’. The way in which refugees manage to make decisions, find information, and organise flight suggests that they are not just victims whose lives are determined by external forces. However, some of the refugees described parts of their journeys as having lost complete control over their lives. For example, Abbas told me how he had had the courage to walk through the mountains to Turkey from northern Iraq, but that once he had paid smugglers in Ankara, he felt completely helpless:

I traveled from northern Iraq. We walked through the mountains to Turkey. Twelve of us, we were with twelve people. It was very dangerous, you can get caught, we did not all survive (Ref 4).

In Turkey, I went to Ankara, and from there I came to London. I paid 5000 pounds. I did not know where they would take me, to which country. And I was like a baby, from that moment on, I did not know anything. I did not choose England, I paid and they brought me here, it was out of my hands (Ref 4).

Abbas expresses this feeling of complete helplessness, of having handed the controls over his life over to others as ‘feeling like a baby’. Strangely enough, another participant, with

whom the interview was carried out in French, described the same part of his journey in exactly the same way.

Philippe

Philippe told me he was caught up in violent conflict because of the work he had done. He discussed the war in Congo, how his president had been chased away, and was now in the UK as a refugee. He believed the war is not only political, but also economical, 'it is about oil' (Ref 7). Philippe had worked as an electrical engineer on an oil platform. It was his job to provide oil to the military. When the rebels took over, they thought of Philippe as an accomplice for the previous government. He was arrested and tortured, and at the time of the interview still suffered from his wounds.

Philippe never flinched when he told me his story, not even when he mentioned how he had been tortured. He became however very distressed when he told me of the feelings of complete dependence when he paid smugglers to take him:

My director gave me money to leave the country. I walked two months, through Congo, to arrive in Gabon. In Gabon they told me not to stay, because the authorities would send me back. The president's wife is the daughter of the rebels' president in my country (Ref 7).

I left Gabon, and went to Centre Afrique. There I paid Air Afrique staff 20,000FF. Then I did not know what was happening, I was like a baby - J'étais comme un bébé. I bought a journey, the documents, passport, they took me to London (Ref 7).

For those refugees that make such dangerous journeys, this feeling of a loss of control, this loss of agency in one's own life, is pretty much the mood that accompanies them. Abbas and Philippe explain this as 'being like a baby'.

Amira

Amira left Kosovo in a state of conflict and upheaval, with her husband and their three children. She told the story of how members of her community came from neighboring villages, to warn them that the Serbs were coming. They all knew what that meant, and Amira and her family, together with many other villagers fled to the mountains. They stayed there for three days, and then traveled to a refugee camp in Macedonia. The Red Cross at the refugee camp was taking all the young girls to a place of safety, and they also took Amira's daughter. Amira told me her reasoning in deciding to flee. She had not wanted to leave the region, and she told me she did not worry about her or her husband's safety, but she did not want her children to be in danger. They were sent money by a cousin in Germany, and fled quite soon after. Amira and her husband made a rational decision to leave, and, as suggested by Robinson and Segrott (2002), they had the capacity to find information, and organise flight, despite the gravity of their situation. They arranged payment with smugglers, and left in the middle of the night, unaware of where they were being taken:

The man came three o'clock, in middle of night, we keep papers, we didn't know to go where. We were put in car, a big car, more like truck. It was full with people, but dark, cannot see. Later we see my husband's cousin with her child (Ref 20).

Amira recalled the austere conditions in the truck quite vividly, and how important it was to keep children quiet. She also told me that the journey made her feel very 'dirty' and undignified:

They prefer not to take children, children cry, and then driver is stopped. One man in truck, he was helper, he was nice, give a little orange, food for child. We had to

do everything in there, you know, urine, in there, it was dirty, smelly, so smelly (Ref 20).

Although Amira portrayed a very bleak picture of her family's experiences, and stated that she was very worried about not knowing where the Red Cross had taken her daughter, she also still managed to convey a sense of human dignity, and some indication of strength. This disappeared completely during the next part of the story. She told me that the truck stopped at some point, they did not know where they were, and suddenly there was this loud banging noise on the side of the truck:

One man in Belgium⁴⁹, he banging outside on the truck. I was so scared, so scared, we did not know where we were. Then he open truck at the back, he look at us, and he shouted 'What is that'? and then he did like this (she makes gesture as if holding an automatic gun and shoots), and he shouting 'kaput, kaput, you all kaput'. My husband had been quiet through all the trouble, but then, it was too much, he say to him 'Serb make us kaput, why you make us kaput, we are already kaput!!'

Amira's husband states 'we are already kaput', as if to say, 'what more do you think you can do to us'? Although not the same as the loss of control that Abbas and Philippe described as 'feeling like a baby', using a term like 'kaput' does indicate that Amira's husband also interpreted the experiences of their journey into the unknown through an enormous sense of loss and displacement. How much more can you make us 'kaput' he asks, the worst that can happen to us has happened already. It reflects a deep sense of a losing the capacity to act.

This sense of dependence was not experienced by all participants during their journey. A woman from Afghanistan, Shabibi, did not say much about how she felt during the

⁴⁹ Amira told me this happened in Belgium, but did not know that she was in Belgium at the time.

journey, and I have interpreted the way she coped with the extreme circumstances she experienced during her journey as a *narrative of courage*.

A Narrative of Courage

Shabibi's story begins in Afghanistan. She told me that when the Russian communists came and occupied Afghanistan, they destroyed their way of life. The government under Russian rule demanded 'complete obedience of people' (Ref 12). Shabibi's husband was a journalist who had studied in the US, and he could not conform to the Communist way of life. He was against the Communists and very outspoken. The government did not approve of him, and put him in prison. Whilst in prison he suffered quite severe mental health problems from which he never recovered. When he came out of prison, he continued his political writing, and circulated this amongst his friends. He risked being imprisoned again, but managed to escape to Pakistan. Shabibi needed a few weeks to organize the journey to follow him with their three children, and then she also left Afghanistan for Pakistan:

I followed him afterwards with my three children, they were 14, 10 and Sulaiman the youngest, he was then a baby of 4 months old. We left Kabul, made a long journey, by bus, by lorry, and there were many checkpoints (Ref 12).

Shabibi and her children were always scared that they might be discovered whilst they were traveling by bus. However, the latter part of the journey, walking through the mountains with the help of local guides, made the journey even more difficult and dangerous:

...and then with some guides, we continue the journey on foot through the mountains. It was very hard, and sometimes it was very dangerous...the children

and I had to hide from helicopters in the bushes once, and I lost my shoes. We just had to carry on walking...then there was the cold, the mountains are dangerous you know...as we came to the top, the wind started to blow strong. The guides tied my son to my back for safety...I remember when we could see Pakistan and freedom below us, and I looked back for the last time to where I had belonged (Ref 12).

Shabibi made the decision to follow her husband rationally. Making the journey she did, walking through the mountains, with her baby tied to her back, does not just reveal a strong capacity to act, but also displays great courage and strength of mind.

A Narrative of Struggling for Legality

I was introduced to Omar by his son Mo, a young Somali refugee who I had already interviewed and met a few times. Mo stayed for the first ten minutes of the interview, to make sure his father and I could communicate in English. After this, he left us until the end of the interview. The story Omar told was mostly of the journey in search of safety, because although he lived in some of the countries he traveled through for a few years, he never managed to settle and work legally in any of these countries. For Omar, it took a number of years before he could settle and bring his family to safety.

Omar left Somalia with his wife in 1978, and then lived in Ethiopia. In 1985 he had to leave, because he had been shot in some armed struggle on the border between Ethiopia and Somalia. He and his family moved to Kenya, where he tried to apply for asylum at the UNHCR office in Nairobi:

Every six months we had to go to office, some people got food, travel documents, for me nothing. This was office, UNHCR office in Nairobi, but until 1990 there were no refugee camps for Somali people (Ref 18)⁵⁰.

They stayed in Kenya until 1988, until Omar decided to try and build a life elsewhere, and send for his family later. Sometimes the plans on how and where to claim asylum can change during flight. As a refugee is in transit countries, they may become more informed, circumstances might change, or if they are using an agent, they might change previous arrangements (Barsky, 2000; see also in Robinson and Segrott, 2002). Omar found very little support for himself and his family, and he had to keep trying in different places.

He bought an illegal Somali passport, and took it to the Somali embassy. He claimed that if they knew which tribe he was from they would not help him, and that he needed a 'false' Somali identity to be able to apply for a visa for Iraq. The Iraqi government would grant visas to people from Somalia, because it is also a Muslim country, but they would not so readily grant visas to Kenyans, because they are considered too 'westernised' (Ref 18), Omar realized he needed a visa as a Somali to be able to have a legitimate visa for Iraq. He managed to travel to Iraq, whilst his wife and children stayed in Kenya. However, soon after Omar left, the government in Kenya started sending all Somali people back to Somalia, and Omar, who was by then in Iraq could do nothing to help them:

⁵⁰ Many Somali refugees sought refuge in neighbouring African countries, and as Omar did, many moved to Arab states with which they felt religious affiliation, and with which some migrant worker routes had already been established (Swiss Forum for Migration and Population Studies, 2006).

My family stayed in Kenya. In 1989, the Kenya government tried to send all Somali people back to Somalia. My wife then took the children to Zambia. I was still in Iraq, I could do nothing (Ref 18).

He worked in Iraq as long as possible, but then Iraq started having its own (well known) conflict, and it became very difficult for Omar to find work. He decided to try to get a visa for Romania:

Then I tried to get visa for Romania, and I got it. There have always been good relations between Somalia and Romania, they are both Communist countries (Ref 18).

Omar traveled to Romania, but was never allowed into the country. They help him at the airport. Romania at the time was in turmoil with the demise of the Ceaușesku regime, and political changes afterwards:

In Romania, it was very bad, I saw more fighting. They started to catch all foreigners, they imprisoned me in airport for two months. They ask me, where you want to go? I tell them, any country that will accept me. Syria accepted me. The soldiers, they took my money, left me with 40 dollars, I had 1200 dollars (Ref 18).

He was given an 'interim visa' in Syria, but he could not find any work, and there was nobody to help. From Syria he travelled to Lebanon, because he heard from other migrants that although there was trouble in Lebanon, it is easier to find work:

They tell me, there is trouble in Lebanon, but there is work, you can be shot, but you can survive. In one year, I stayed in four different countries. Did not speak to my children, or to my wife. In Lebanon, I could work, and send money to my wife and three children in Kenya (Ref 18).

Although he could now send money to his family, his ultimate aim was still to find a 'legal' place of safety for him and all of his family, and he left Lebanon hoping to find passage to London:

In 1990, I went back to Syria. Syria was still difficult and I left to go to Turkey. I was struggling very hard, but I buy Kenyan passport again, so I could try to get a ticket to London. It was very difficult, too difficult at that time, but then I was lucky (Ref 18).

Omar finally arrived at Gatwick on 17 December 1990. He destroyed the false identity papers before landing. At the airport he told the immigration officials that he had travelled with a false passport, and that he had destroyed it. He then emphasized that he had destroyed the documents and told the police the truth because he wanted to claim asylum and be 'legal', so he could finally also bring his family to safety:

I want to stay here legal, and for peace. They helped me to fill out forms, I claimed political asylum and I asked them to help me for my wife and children to come here too (Ref 18).

Omar endured life in transit for twelve years. His journey was characterized by the struggle to find a place where he could enter and settle legally, in order to bring his family to safety. In search of a 'legal' migration, he moved from country to country, and he continuously needed to re-negotiate his strategy. Omar was victimized by war and conflict, as well as by 'processes of statecraft' (Soguk, 1999), and accessibility to countries in terms of visa restrictions and border control was a strong contributing factor (Robinson and Segrott, 2002: 5) in determining Omar's journey. However, he had to also rationally think about where to go next, how to obtain identity papers, which country would allow him entry, and where could he find work, which indicates that in pursuing 'legality' (Ref 18), Omar needed to be pro-active and capable of agency.

The above narratives show that refugees embark on dangerous journeys into the unknown, sometimes having to move from country to country, often not knowing where they are being taken. The journeys people make and the accessibility to countries of asylum are determined by financial resources, identity papers, and people smugglers. Refugees rarely have a choice in where they are taken, and frequently, as in the case of Abbas and Amira, do not know the destination of their journey. Although all participants told me stories of courage, resilience and the capacity for agency, in listening to the narratives of the different journeys, it became apparent that when refugees have no knowledge of their destination, and when their lives are in the hands of agents, it can cause them to feel a great sense dependency and loss of control, to the point that they ‘feel like a baby’, or that they are ‘kaput’. Many who arrive in Britain have to claim asylum in this state of barely knowing what is happening to them.

Arrival in Britain: the early stage of settlement

Upon arrival, the turmoil that has entered the lives of refugees often continues to shape their experiences. The fear that shadowed them in their homelands has followed them to their new destinations. There is a sense of confusion, which is frequently exacerbated by not speaking English. People experience a sense of loss, and find it difficult to learn to find their way, because they cannot communicate with anyone. In this situation, they have to claim asylum⁵¹. The final part of this chapter aims to provide an insight into the situation of refugees when they first arrive on British shores. The following quotation

⁵¹ As explained in chapter three, the Asylum and Immigration Act of 1996 stipulated that refugees needed to claim asylum at port of entry, and that asylum seekers who applied in-country would potentially lose their entitlements to social security benefits

from a refugee from Zimbabwe captures very well the mood that accompanies many new arrivals:

I was never too sure what to expect of the most popular island in the world. I had not a vivid idea of what life in England was like despite coming from the Commonwealth where I had a bit of interaction with British nationals. Not that I had given it much thought as all I was concerned with was my safety. As things turned out, whatever ideas I had about the British were based on mere speculation and heresy. I was little prepared for life in the British homeland. When I landed at Heathrow airport...a pretty and polite young lady attended to me. As I declared my status, she sighed heavily and for a moment I was sure armed guards would appear and I would be seized and thrown into prison to await my deportation (Qobo Maysia – refugee from Zimbabwe, 2007: 169).

The following section describes the experiences upon arrival in this country of three refugees: Zarah from Iraq, who was ‘just following’ her husband; Bob from Romania, who was not sure how to claim asylum; and Philippe from the Democratic Republic of Congo, who ended up on the street for a night, because he had no idea what to do.

Zarah: ‘just following’

Zarah had fled Iraq with her husband and her daughter after some horrific experiences. She had been told not to speak during the journey and the flight, but to be ‘just following’. She did not know where she was, she suffered a lot, and was very scared, both whilst still in Iraq, and during the journey. The fears and suspicion that had blemished her life in Iraq, continued upon arrival here, she did not believe that she was in London:

We landed in Heathrow Airport, as I told you I wasn’t conscious of what was going on with me, just following. We came to land, I didn’t even know destination, where we were going. He didn’t exactly tell us, this smuggler, where we are going. Then when we arrived at airport, he said just follow me, you don’t have to talk or say anything. Just follow me (Ref 1).

We came to a place near Edgware Road, he brought us there, he said this is Edgware Road, you are safe, go. Then I still don't know where we are, I say to my husband, where are we? He said are you stupid, you didn't hear we are in England. I said but here are lots of Arab shops, we are in an Arab country. He said, no, we are in a place in England, where Arab community lives. I still don't believe him (Ref 1).

For a long time, Zarah was not able to deal with the formal aspects of finding her way into British society, and initially her husband claimed asylum, looked for legal assistance, and found accommodation. Although other refugees who contributed to this study did know where they were upon arrival, they also had no idea where or how to claim asylum, or even what 'asylum' exactly means.

Bob: not knowing where to claim asylum

Bob had left Romania after the rapid change in government following the demise of the Ceauşesku regime. He was almost 'surprised' that he ended up leaving his country, that he would not have to join the Army, and that he would not have to be part of the new government. Having arrived in Britain, he did not know what to do:

Here, I didn't know what to do.....you are all on your own; you cannot ask your neighbours on the plane, 'are you going back'? We were all scared, too scared to talk to each other. In Bristol we went through customs, you are sort of on holiday. If we had seen an immigration officer, we could have applied there and then (Ref 21).

Bob and his fellow travellers stayed on a campsite in Breen Sands near Bristol, which they had booked in Romania as an organised tourist vacation. They stayed there for a few days, not knowing what to do, and eventually decided to go to London. They travelled to London by bus, and still none of them had any idea how to claim asylum. Bob was not sure what 'asylum' meant, he saw it as related to Human Rights. He expected he could leave his country to find some kind of 'sanctuary' for a short period of time:

...but how to claim asylum, do you go to police office? What to do?.....There is this organisation, it is called something like 'Free Romanians around the World'⁵², they are in Regent Street. We ask them for advise, they told us it would be difficult to claim for asylum, but that we would have to go to the British Refugee Council, or to the Home Office.....Then we took a cab, to the British Refugee Council, we got there at about half past five. In Bondway, we just walked in and told them (Ref 21).

The following chapter will examine in-depth how Bob's lack of knowledge of the asylum procedure led to his claim being refused. Subsequently he had to go through many appeals and court cases, before he could begin to think about building a life here.

Philippe: 'go find authority and ask for refugee status'

For Philippe, who had felt an acute loss of control over his life after he had paid his smugglers, his arrival in Britain was characterized by not finding any support. He was extremely worried about his wife and children, because after he left, he did not know what had happened to them. He could not speak any English at all, and found it very difficult to know what to do:

When I arrived here, they (smugglers) took me to Portsmouth, there they told me to find authority and ask for refugee status. I went to policeman, on the street, and asked him, 'where is the Home Office'? They ask me 'why'? I said I was refugee in Portsmouth, and they sent me to London, but I had no more money. I slept outside, begged for money, in the station bought a ticket for just one more station. But on the train to London, the conductor let me stay. This was Tuesday. I arrived at Waterloo station, there I was told to go to Croydon, to the Home Office. When I got there, I waited six hours, there were many people waiting. They told me to come back tomorrow, Wednesday. The Home Office made me sleep outside (Ref 7).

Philippe's early stage of settlement was complicated by fear, for himself and his family.

He would not go out, only to the library, to try to learn English:

⁵² *The Romanian Cultural Centre* in Regent Street

Food in the Eurotower is not good, room is clean, but kitchen is dirty. What I do, I go to room and library, I do not go out, I am afraid of everything. But at least in library I can study English, it is very important, to learn English...I have a wife and three children, I do not know where they are. I do not know they are safe. In Congo people left cities, went into forests. My family went also in the forest (Ref 7).

Some of the issues that begin to emerge as problematic in early settlement, can be of a personal nature, such as fear and not daring to go out. However, people also express that they had problems because of not speaking English, having little knowledge of what to do, and generally finding it difficult to access services.

Conclusion

The findings in this chapter have demonstrated the diversity of refugee experiences that constitute refugee stories, and have examined how refugees weave their personal experiences into life stories through the process of 'narrative knowing'. Whilst some of the participants such as Ruben or Miranda revealed that they had to flee the situation in their home country for reasons of war, conflict and ethnic cleansing, others such as Abbas and Hameed emphasized how the persecution of the Kurds in Iraq and Iran drew them into political activity to the extent that it became too dangerous for them to stay. Whilst some refugees talked mainly about the political situation in their country, others described the journey in minute detail. For a number of interviewees it was their family, or how they coped with settlement that deserved the most attention, yet others described the lengthy and stressful process that is the asylum procedure. All the stories were different. People have different experiences of the situation in the homelands, make many different kinds of journeys, and are faced with a variety of issues that hinder settlement, through which they find different ways of making a new life. To sum up, the stories that I

have collected for this study do not present refugee life as a 'uniform condition' (Eastmond, 2007: 253), or the refugee as a 'paradigmatic refugee figure' (Soguk, 1999: 4), instead they tell of the bricolage of refugee experiences that make up a refugee life.

In thinking about 'flight', it is important to recognise that refugees are not people who have simply been forced out of their homelands, because conceptualising them in this way ignores the notion that refugees may have had some influence on what happened to them. Instead, 'flight' should be thought of as a course of action which emerges from negotiations between the self and the wider social and political circumstances of one's situation (Robinson and Segrott, 2002). Ruben could not make the war in Bosnia part of his life story, and lived in hiding for a few months, whilst trying to find ways of coping with his situation. Abbas indicated quite clearly that he had options other than fleeing Iraq, but he did not want to 'spy' for the Secret Police. Hameed made sense of his political struggle within the language of the PDKI, and decided to leave Iran when he realised his life was in danger. They acknowledge that they were forced to flee, but they also discussed how they made sense of the situation in their home country which led to their decision to flee.

Little is known about the journeys refugees make, or how people organise them (Robinson and Segrott, 2002). Many of the participants to this study however talked about their journeys at length and in detail. For some, such as Omar, the journey in search of safety took many years, moving from country to country, always living in an illegal situation. Others managed to find smugglers, but indicated that not knowing their destination, and handing the control of their lives over to others, resulted in a complete

sense of dependency and loss of agency. And again, the diverse experiences of ‘refugeeness’ shows in the story of Shabibi, who, even though she faced quite extreme circumstances whilst walking through the mountains from Afghanistan to Pakistan never mentioned a sense of dependence.

Finally, this chapter has argued that when people arrive in Britain, the sense of chaos that has entered their lives in their homelands, and during their journeys continues upon arrival in Britain. The stories of Zarah, Bob and Philippe indicate that it is not unusual for people to feel quite lost when they arrive, and that often they have no idea what to do next. It is in this state of confusion that they have to claim asylum, start thinking about speaking English, and filling out forms to access a range of services. These narratives will be continued in the following chapters, where we will find out how refugees manage to claim asylum, having to tell their stories in a hostile environment, and how they are confronted with different structural and cultural barriers to settlement.

Chapter Six

THE LIFE STORY OF THE REFUGEE IN THE ASYLUM PROCEDURE

Introduction

The principle of ‘sedentariness’ is the basis from which human life is organised, which means that settlement, the citizen who belongs to a modern nation-state is the norm, ‘the proper subject of political life’ (Soguk, 1999: 9), and any form of migration is seen as a deviation from this. Beginning with this premise, the refugee is neither represented, nor protected by the state, instead refugee lives are blemished by displacement and statelessness. Soguk (ibid) continues to argue that ‘processes of statecraft’ inevitably problematise a person who does not fit into the ‘citizen/nation/state hierarchy’ as a refugee, which emphasizes the idea of the citizen as the norm, and the refugee as the problematic ‘other’. However, individuals who find themselves in the problematic situation of statelessness have the right to seek protection from another state through the process of claiming asylum.

In this context, a person claiming asylum in the United Kingdom is formally asking the British government to recognise them as a person who is seeking entry to the UK in search of safety and protection, under the rules of the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, to which the UK is a signatory. An asylum seeker is entitled to protection under the Convention if they have a ‘well founded fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social

group or political opinion'. There may be other humanitarian or convincing reasons a person fled their homeland, and Leave to Remain can be sought under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) (National Audit Office, 2004; Refugee Council, 2005).

In order to establish whether a person is entitled to protection in the UK under the 1951 Convention or the ECHR, they have to make a claim for asylum to the Home Office. Asylum claims are processed through the 'asylum determination procedure' (see chapter three) where asylum case workers, in accordance with British asylum policy, decide whether a refugee is entitled to remain in Britain. Asylum claims are assessed on the basis of the individual circumstances of each case, and it is during the asylum determination procedure that the telling of, and listening to the life story of the refugee is a vital, if not, the main method by which the status of each individual asylum claim is determined (Amnesty International 2004; Jones, 2007).

The responsibility for providing evidence in support of the claim is on the person who seeks asylum. However, it is extremely difficult for refugees to match their subjective life experiences to the objective parameters of asylum policy. Therefore, this chapter will interpret refugee narratives in relation to the claiming of asylum within the British policy framework and explore the issue of 'credibility' of refugee stories in the asylum determination procedure, thereby facilitating an understanding of how refugees interpret their experiences within a political and structural context.

The Asylum Procedure, an Objectifying Structural Process

Since the early 1990s, successive governments have introduced several pieces of asylum and immigration legislation, which has established a policy framework that is not only designed to deter asylum applicants, restrict entry to the UK, and make access to public services more difficult, but also to speed up the asylum application process. With the empowerment of authorities to detain, remove, and return claimants, reductions in the right to appeal, combined with the setting up of 'fast track schemes' to process asylum applications, the Government came to be in a much better position to control the asylum procedure, and the lives of asylum seekers during their claim for asylum, whilst increasing the ability to remove and deport people once they had been refused (IPPR, 2003: 40-41).

The procedure for asylum claims, or the 'legal route' that every application needs to pass through in order to be considered for any form of Leave to Remain, has developed within the contours of this policy framework. It is not surprising therefore that in recent years the procedure has become streamlined into an 'obstacle course' (Amnesty International, 2004), through which applications are decided on as soon as reasonably possible.

It is during the asylum procedure that the asylum seeker needs to share their subjective life experiences in a way that conforms to the mould of eligibility for refugee status under the 1951 Convention, as interpreted through the structural requirements of British asylum policy. This process of documenting the individual lives of refugees in the structural setting that constitutes the Home Office, can be thought of as Foucault's (1984: 197) concept of 'examination', which is where the subjective experiences of the individual

refugee lose their individuality and come to be categorized. It is during the asylum procedure that the refugee's individual experiences become objectified, and where the subjective experiences of the individual refugee encounter the objectifying requirements of asylum policy as a structural process.

The Issue of 'Credibility'

Immigration officers in the Home Office decide whether an asylum seeker will be granted refugee status by taking refugee narratives and critically analysing them in an attempt to look for a 'well founded fear of persecution'. The 'matching' of refugee stories to the 1951 definition of the refugee includes the assessment of 'the applicant's credibility, the current political situation in their country, evidence of the country's human rights record and, if applicable, medical evidence of torture and abuse. An applicant has to show that they meet the criteria laid down in the Refugee Convention' (National Audit Office, 2004: 11).

The assessment of the claimant's 'credibility' has been approached in a variety of ways. In the early 1990s 'credibility' became important in the guise of questioning who was a 'genuine' or a 'bogus' refugee, especially in the public domain and in political asylum discourses. Despite fervent debates, 'credibility' remained a vague and unclear concept amongst Immigration Officers. They believe an asylum claim to be 'credible' when it seems 'satisfactory' and 'reasonable'. Some elements however, which assist the refugee story to meet the criterion of 'credibility' include a 'recollection of details', and 'consistency'. Therefore, remembering events and dates precisely, is rated as more truthful, as is the 'coherence and consistency' of the story. Contradictory memories of

dates, or a difference in knowledge of the home country between asylum seekers and Immigration Officer, are considered inconsistent and less credible (Jubany-Baucells, 2003: 143-145).

More recently, the government has attempted to clarify the concept of ‘credibility’, and it has become a legitimate requirement of asylum policy. For example, in the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants) Act 2004, a claimant may damage their credibility if they behave in a way that ‘is designed or likely to conceal information, is designed or likely to mislead, or is designed or likely to obstruct or delay the handling or resolution of the claim or the taking of a decision in relation to the claimant’. Behaviour that is considered likely to ‘conceal, mislead, or obstruct the handling of the claim’ includes failure to produce a passport, other identity document, or travel document without reasonable explanation upon request, and not being able, without reasonable explanation, to answer a question by the immigration authorities (HMSO, 2004).

Refugee Narratives as the Basis of an Asylum Claim

The previous chapter argued that there is no common refugee experience, or a refugee narrative which follows a set pattern of events. Instead, the circumstances that make refugees flee their homelands often relate to a complex combination of events. The onus of supporting the claim is on the person who seeks asylum, although the fact that refugee lives comprise a very complex set of experiences makes the process of ‘matching’ their personal accounts to the criteria of asylum policy extremely difficult. The fact that asylum claims are made on the basis of such diverse personal narratives, makes them ‘a unique area of law’ (Amnesty International, 2004: 6).

For example, Martin Jones (2007), who worked as an immigration lawyer in Canada, told the story of how a Chinese client presented his case to him on half a page, written in Chinese, as the basis of his claim for asylum. The Chinese claimant told him that he wanted to claim asylum in Canada because he was a Protestant and could not practice his religion in China. As a claim for asylum this would not be sufficient, so they worked together and ended up with a 30 page family history, which told how the claimant's family had been converted to Protestantism by missionaries in the nineteenth century, and had suffered oppression ever since. Where for the claimant the case seemed quite simple and straightforward, Jones (2007) realized that the narrative needed a lot more consideration before it could be presented as a viable case for asylum, and the claimant's story became embedded in 150 years of family history.

Claiming asylum is a 'unique area of law' because asylum claims are based on refugee narratives that tell of quite extreme experiences, which are divulged under stressful circumstances. Asylum seekers usually share their tales in a format that needs to be 'tailored' before it can be useful as a potentially successful claim for asylum. Applications are considered for eligibility for refugee status within an extremely rigid policy framework that seems more concerned with establishing who is not telling a 'credible' story, and will not be considered a 'genuine' refugee, than with offering a place of safety to those in need.

Most of the participants that contributed to this study told narratives of feeling mistreated by the Home Office, waiting years for a decision, and of how difficult and traumatising the experience of seeking asylum was. This chapter will explore how subjective refugee

stories do not ‘fit’ the structural requirements of the state, or how asylum claims often do not match the requirements of the asylum determination procedure. It will outline and interpret the route of three individual life stories, from the basis of the claim for asylum, through the determination procedure, to when the claimant receives a decision on their case, in an attempt to demonstrate that a claim may be refused not necessarily because it is not based on a ‘well-founded fear of persecution’, but because of the inadequacies of the British asylum seeking system.

Although the narratives are very different, each case highlights a different aspect of the process of claiming asylum, and each has the potential to offer an in-depth understanding of the criteria by which individual narratives are assessed. The first case is of Moayad, who received a ‘first refusal’ to his claim, but was accepted immediately upon appeal. The story of Zarah did not match the requirements of British policy making for a complex set of gender issues. Bob’s claim was initially refused on the basis of non-compliance with Home Office requirements. His appeal procedure took several years, and took place during the early 1990s, where it came to be caught up in the climate of fear about numbers, and discourses of ‘bogus’ refugees.

Moayad’s Story: A Narrative of First Refusal

Moayad was a Kurdish guerrilla commander in Turkey for nine years. He arrived in the UK in 1999, and made a claim for asylum two days after his arrival. He was called for an interview after two years, and refused. He then appealed, and after two more years, he was granted refugee status. The whole process took almost five years. Moayad’s command of the English language was very limited at the time of the interview, and we

often needed to discuss what he meant exactly, since he did not know the words to explain himself. Since one of the refugee workers I interviewed had told me about Moayad's case before I met him, I have woven his comments into the narrative of Moayad's claim for asylum where appropriate.

In the legal domain of claiming asylum, it is not unusual for cases to be refused in the first instance. In fact, the Home Office has been criticised for poor quality initial decision making, since first refusals are not without some detrimental consequences. Apart from the fact that it is very traumatic for the claimant to be faced with a refusal on their claim (Amnesty International, 2004; Smith, 2004), prolonging the asylum application process with lengthy appeals procedures because of poor quality initial decision making, is a very costly affair (National Audit Office, 2004). Moayad's claim was refused in the first instance, not because he could not demonstrate a 'well-founded fear of persecution', but for reasons such as a chaotic state upon arrival, lack of trust of officials, unstable mental health, and some cultural issues. Each of these concerns will be discussed below.

Firstly, Moayad found it difficult to tell his story in the environment of the Home Office, simply because he was not sure what was expected of him. He felt quite isolated when he arrived in the UK, and told me he suffered depression during the time he claimed asylum, whilst waiting for news from the Home Office, and during the time of the interviews, which made it difficult for him to think clearly and respond logically to situations:

When I come I had a psychological problem. Because I stayed in PKK a long time, about nine years, and my sister she died. My other sister she still there. My psychology became very bad, therefore I was going to Medical Foundation. They give me some medicine. But three times I became very.....I tried....I wanted to kill myself. First time I took tablets, I was found outside, somebody found me. I

don't remember, I stayed for days in the hospital. I tried again, after, but I couldn't kill myself. For these things now I go to psychologist, every three months. I still have medicine.....But for this, when I came to UK, I couldn't make anything, couldn't do anything, Home Office, it was difficult. And could not work or make friends. I couldn't go to anywhere, and no speak English (Ref 2).

Moayad's experiences suggest that refugee stories in the asylum determination procedure have to be told under psychologically quite stressful circumstances for the refugee, which gives their case a troubled start right from the onset. A report on the first refusal of asylum cases by Amnesty International (2004) strongly indicates that many asylum seekers may be suffering from the experiences of the situation in their country, whilst others may have lost relatives, or witnessed acts of violence. They have to claim asylum, whilst these experiences prey on their mind. In the screening interview, they need to explain why they are seeking protection in the UK, which means they have to disclose information about themselves and their families, and about the circumstances that made them leave their country.

The sharing of these experiences often needs to be done through an interpreter they have not met before, or to a solicitor with whom they do not yet have a 'trusting relationship' (ibid), and ultimately to an immigration case worker, who will decide their claim. Immigration officers are instructed to elicit information about asylum applicants, their families, some details about the journey they made and their lives prior to their flight, even about the reasons for the claim for asylum. If later on in the procedure, there are inconsistencies between issues discussed at this interview, and at any later stage of the process, this will often be used by the Home Office to challenge the refugee's credibility (Coker et al, 2004: 21).

However, a person in a state of psychological instability, who does not trust his or her surroundings, and does not know what is expected of them, may not necessarily give answers that the immigration officer is looking for:

..... asylum seekers when he comes here he finds himself in a society where he does not speak the language, does not know people, is not used to speaking to solicitor, his relationship with solicitor is not based on trust, so asylum seeker may not give all information that he may have. He gets worried, and sometimes he may give the answers he thinks the Immigration Officer wants, and becomes contradictory. We had a case here of a guerrilla commander (Moayad). He has ample proof to show that he was an activist, injured in struggle (RW 1).

In the asylum procedure, Moayad's story has been told in a situation marred by psychological instability, lack of understanding, anxiety and mistrust, which has the potential to result in his claim to be permeated by inconsistencies and discrepancies. Furthermore, his case will be decided in a climate shaped by policy requirements that need refugee narratives to comply with a certain logic or rationality, and by a culture of disbelief that considers asylum seekers to be untrustworthy and 'bogus' from the onset. Immigration officers are trained to be 'investigators starting from a perspective of suspicion and disbelief' (Jubany-Baucells, 2003: 115). The emerging lack of credibility gives his claim little chance of being given a 'fair' hearing.

Moayad's Claim for Asylum

Interviewing Moayad was difficult, his command of the English language was very limited, and the way he told me his story was incoherent, it lacked a logical sequence of events, and there was no logic or reason to how he described specific situations. I would let him talk, and then track back with him, to piece the events together, fragment by fragment. If this is the way he told the story to me, I can imagine how it must have been

during the Home Office interview, given that he suffered quite severe depression at the time, for which he was given treatment and medication by the Medical Foundation. The following is the narrative that eventually evolved, and upon which his claim for asylum was based:

I spread my life in three parts. First part, is with my family, second part is the Party life, and the third part is now, today (Ref 2).

In Turkey when I was studying in University, I was about 19 (in 1989), I could always see, the Kurdish people have so many problems. So after one year, I could not study anymore. Then I went to the mountains, and I joined the PKK (Kurdish Communist Party). I became a guerrilla, like a commander. We were fighting against the Turkish army for four years (until March 1995) (Ref 2).

I was a group commander, we separate groups, five men came with me, higher into mountains, into snow. It was like, I made secret operation. Then people were dead, we couldn't get back. It was a Turkish army attack, they attack us with helicopter. Turkish army, they cut us off. We stay in mountains long time (Ref 2).

My footfingers froze. I lost my footfingers (toes). After this secret operation, I went to the Kurdish villages for hiding from Turkish army. But also to be with Kurdish people, to help them with problems. After four years, I couldn't stay in mountains, in guerrilla, it was too dangerous, and my health was not good (Ref 2).

Moayad and his group were not captured, but the Turkish army patrolled the area by helicopter, blocking certain passes through the snow, and they could not get out of the mountains, or out of the snow. They stayed up in the snow without food or shelter for quite a while, and suffered hypothermia. It took about half an hour for Moayad to get me to understand what had happened to him in the mountains, and how it changed his life. It was very difficult to understand him. He kept talking about how his footfingers froze, but not telling me when or where this happened.

During the interview, it seemed as if Moayad did not remember accurately what happened to him when he was in the mountains. For him the most important memory of this occasion was the snow, the cold, that some of his friends died, and that his foot-fingers froze. He did not mention the word ‘hypothermia’, he explained it as ‘my foot-fingers froze’. It is not uncommon for someone who has suffered some severely traumatic experiences, to have their memory affected as a result of these experiences. For example, someone who tries to remember a particularly distressing event, might concentrate on one ‘peripheral detail’ of this event, as a coping mechanism, because the memory of the whole event might be too traumatic (Cohen, J. 2001: 299).

Not only was Moayad’s claim complicated by his troubled psyche, the *way* he told his story, was influenced by his cultural background, and would not meet the more ‘fixed’ requirements of the Home Office as situated in a culture of Western logic. Moayad told his story on the basis of which experiences were important to him. When he told me about the events in the mountains, it took about twenty minutes for him to express the words in English. I then needed to probe him for more information, and assemble the extracted fragments together for a further ten minutes. If you ask Moayad where he lost his ‘footfingers’ he will answer ‘in the mountains’, if you ask him when this happened, his reply will be ‘in winter, it was cold’. The Home Office however, requires information to be more precise:

.... most refugees they will fail first time. Because the society in which they are coming is very different than in their country. Here they are told they have to have evidence, they have to have data, dates. In our culture, dates are not important. It may not even be properly recorded, the time factors are different. Here it is fixed, we know everything in this culture is to the hour, to the minute (RW1).

Our culture is fluid, the people's thinking position is also fluid, so therefore things are not so clearly defined as they are here. The Home Office interviewer has a fixed clearly defined aim, questions, and he or she is seeking clearly defined answers. They don't know that for asylum seekers, when he or she comes, things are not so clearly defined. **Answers then often do not fit questions (my emphasis).** For example, they ask, when and where did something happen. The asylum seekers can only give a vague answer, because it is not the exact date or month that is important, it is the experience, the story itself that is more important to them (RW1).⁵³

The UNHCR Second Quality Initiative Project Report (2005: 9-12) notes how caseworkers are known to 'apply a narrow UK-perspective when assessing events alleged to have taken place in significantly different cultural, political and social contexts' thereby not taking cultural differences into account. There also seems to be a trend to disbelieve asylum claimants' stories, which has led to a 'culture of refusal'. The report comments that asylum interviews are often ill prepared, unfocused, do not sufficiently probe the interviewee. Interviewers do not seek sufficient clarification when an answer is vague or inconsistent, especially with regards to the more significant issues in a claimant's story. This has the potential to result in decisions of a lack of credibility are often made on the basis of little or no evidence.

After his experiences in the mountains, Moayad could not work as a guerrilla anymore, and the PKK changed his duties, he became a trainer in Kurdish history and culture for Kurdish people in different European countries:

I changed to become trainer, from 1995. I came to Europa in 1995. I went for three weeks to Germany, then to Greece. I spent time also in Holland and Belgium, all different places. I was teaching Kurdish people about democracy, communism, human rights, but mostly about Kurdish culture, Kurdish history, all these things. We would always just rent some place for teaching (Ref 2).

⁵³ Similar to the passage in chapter two on Africanism, by Biko, which indicates cultural differences in communication

During his time as a trainer for PKK, Moayad became completely disillusioned with the party, especially with the leader. He felt that the Party was using communist ideals as an excuse for power and violence:

I still believe communism, but I started thinking that PKK is not like Karl Marx communism, I don't like the fighting. You see, I always try to make Party happy, I am member, if Party say do this, I go there, and do it. Because I am a member of Party, therefore if Party wants me to going there, I was going. When I was in Greece, Party told me you must come quickly to Turkey, and I went to Turkey. But when I was there, I don't know how to say, I lost some idea about Party, about Party relations. Because I didn't believe Party too much (Ref 2).

The way Moayad tells of his experiences with the PKK, is as if where he previously did everything the party asked of him without questioning, he almost operated for them as a tool in the machinery of the party. When he lost his belief in the party's values, he could not stay and do their work anymore. Apart from being torn by his desire to flee, and the allegiance he felt to his family, he fully realised the danger he might be in, if he stayed:

But I couldn't let people from Party know, because my family, they want me to stay in the Party. Because when I was going to Party, then sometimes it is hard for the family. My sister, two sisters, some cousins going into the Party too, after me. But my sister was dead, guerrilla, and dead. And other cousin also, dead, guerrilla, and dead. Therefore, my mum and my father, and older brother, they think Party take lives, now you must stay in Party (Ref 2).

But also, in Party, they always said, you can't leave from Party. But in 1999, in Turkey I said I want to leave from Party and I left. I didn't listen to my family, and other people, I left from Party. But I couldn't stay in Turkey, Party do not protect me. This is PKK, you cannot leave Party, they say, if you leave from Party we kill you or kill someone from your family (Ref 2).

I thought UK will be safety country for me and so I came here. Because some places in Europa, it was dangerous, like Germany. Because Germany is really, there too many members of Party in Germany, so many Kurdish people (Ref 2).

Moayad left Turkey because he thought his life would be in danger. He thought he would be persecuted by the Turkish government for his activities with the PKK, and by the PKK for having left. He could not go to another European country, because the PKK is active in several regions in Europe. He came to Britain, because he thought he would be safest here. He claimed asylum on the basis of being persecuted by the PKK and the Turkish government.

First Refusal and a Lack of Credibility

After his claim for asylum, Moayad waited for an interview for two years. Once he had had the interview, he did not receive a response, he was kept waiting again. His doctor at the Medical Foundation then sent a letter to the Home Office for him, urging them to respond swiftly. When it finally came, it was very disappointing:

...and they sent me a letter, and they gave negative answer to me. Home Office was saying that Turkey is a democratic country, and you can go to Turkey it would be safe. But Turkish government think PKK is terrorist party, and they would judge me (Ref 2).

During the first interview, Moayad had not told the full story, he did not trust the immigration officer, or his solicitor. He did not realise he had to give dates, full details of events, and information of his activities as a guerrilla commander with the PKK, and he did not give information that was not specifically asked in the interview. As claimed by the refugee worker who commented on Moayad's case:

..... from his own cultural background, often they believe their solicitor can speak on their behalf, so he relies on the skills of the solicitor, and sometimes he relies also on the skills, the interviewing skills of the immigration officer, waiting for immigration officer to ask further questions, much more investigative questions. He may not reveal certain information, if he is not asked. But because he did not

trust interview with the Immigration Officer, he did not reveal certain information. Immigration Officer said I do not believe you, and he was refused (RW1).

For the refugee worker, there was no question that Moayad would be granted refugee status. He was well aware of the problem of 'first refusal' and how to overcome this:

You will see a great level of people has been refused first time, the application has not been recognised, what happens is the second time they involve other parties, some highly specialised people, more evidence is gathered, you then see that more people get asylum through appeal process. Therefore, in the case of Moayad, 'we had to talk to him, and explain to him that his information is important, that he should have confidence in the whole process, and that he is representative of his own cause. So suddenly he start to change, he gave an excellent statement in the appeal.... (RW1).

Moayad does not tell me he was granted asylum because he gave an excellent statement, he believes it happened because this time he had a nice judge who believed him:

I apply again, I appealed against decision. We went to the court, but a nice people, a nice judge. And he believed me, and he believed my story. Now I get, they tell me I can stay (Ref 2).

During the early years of Moayad's asylum determination procedure his confusion, depression, and a lack of understanding what was expected of him due to cultural differences, encountered the 'culture of disbelief' that prevails amongst case workers at the Home Office. Consequently his case became infused with a lack of credibility, was not given the consideration it required, and his claim was refused. He failed, not because his claim was unfounded, but because he did not convince his case worker that he had a 'well founded fear of persecution'. Moayad then learned how to present his case upon appeal, which is not unusual:

Many refugees after they refused, they go home and prepare better for appeal.....The first time, they are traumatised, they need to think, then they meet all the members of the community, they learn, they discuss how to do this. They become informed from interpreters, from community organisations, anything it helps the asylum seeker to refine their story in a way to fit into the needs or the requirements of the Home Office, or the Immigration Officer (RW1).

Moayad's story is a narrative of first refusal, because although initially he failed to tell the story of his experiences in a way that would meet the requirements of the rigid asylum policy framework that prevails in Britain, he learned to do so, and was granted asylum upon appeal.

Zarah's Story: Asylum and the Issue of Gender

The following narrative portrays the life of a well educated, middle class woman from Baghdad. Her father was Arab, and a member of Saddam's political party. Her mother is Kurdish. Her father's position helped her to get a good degree, and later a good academic job. She married her husband, who is Kurdish, in 1991, and describes that they 'enjoyed a good life'. She lived with him and his family, and she did sometimes see people come to the house to meet secretly, but claims that she always avoided these occasions.

In 1999, Zarah's husband was taken and detained by the secret police twice, the second time they also took and detained Zarah. Under these circumstances, they decided to leave Iraq, and look for safety elsewhere. They fled Iraq in the autumn of 2000, with their daughter, and arrived in Britain in December of that year.

The husband applied for asylum, with Zarah as a dependant, the day after their arrival. During the initial application process, they had no legal representation or any form of immigration or legal advice at all, and they were refused after two weeks. After one year,

and some lengthy appeal procedures, the husband's solicitor told him he had been refused asylum, and had no more right to appeal. She advised him that their only chance of permission to stay in Britain would be if Zarah applied for asylum.

Zarah suffered quite severe mental health problems, because of the traumatic events in Iraq. During the journey from Iraq to the UK, and whilst her husband's claim was being considered, she behaved quite erratically at times, had no idea what was happening, did not go out, and was very scared:

I was quite aggressive, when you see me in the street that year you would realise that I am not normal, I am crazy. Not concentrating, not looking, and I keep looking behind me. Suddenly, I pick up my phone, because I feel someone is calling me, still I thought my mum is calling me (Ref 1).

Her GP urged her to see a counsellor, to which she reluctantly agreed. After a few sessions, she started telling her counsellor about the traumatic experiences, and that she didn't dare claim asylum, because if her 'secret' would come out, she would be excluded from her community, would lose her family, and her daughter.

The counsellor made Zarah understand that in Britain we live in a society with different values towards women, and that she would be quite safe if she talked about what had happened to her. For Zarah, the offer of advice and help was extremely important:

...she said, 'you have to (claim asylum), you are not alone here'. It was new for me, this recognition, and these organisations that help you. She said, I can give you advice, where to go. Then she said, 'I will help'. For me, this it was like light (Ref 1).

Zarah then agreed to claim for asylum, but made sure she would speak to her solicitor alone, without her husband. The solicitor was a Muslim woman, who well understood the

implications of Zarah's situation, and she promised not to tell Zarah's husband anything about the claim, or to send any letters to her home.

The story that Zarah told for the first time, initially to her counsellor, and later on to her solicitor, is one that evokes quite raw emotion, especially for the person who tells it, and it is this story upon which the claim for asylum was based:

Something happened, that man, Odé, Saddam's son, manager of our College he sent for me to speak to him. They said, we know you, we know your dad, and I did not understand. They start to tell me that members of the Communist Party, working against the government, were at my house. Then they asked me for co-operations, co-operations with them, against my husband (Ref 1).

I did not tell him. But I start to ask my husband, but he said, none of your business, I am not involved in your family's business, so don't you ask me such questions (Ref 1).

This was in 1992 or 1993. And they had me going to Ode's office. I did not want to go, he was known for touching the womans. But I went. I was shaking when I met him, he start touching my arm, my shoulder, saying and repeat, don't be scared, he ask me to co-operate, otherwise, sweetheart, you won't be alive, don't forget (Ref 1).

A kind of depression, scared, a kind of fear. I don't know what was going on, and meanwhile they transfer me from University to Institute, they took all degrees away from me, so I turn from being assistant lecturer at University, to being a laboratory technician (Ref 1).

I start to have this problem, until 1999, when my husband become captured, they capture him, and then they released him, they couldn't find any evidence against him. Then they capture him again, they came out of nowhere, then I was alone, I had my daughter, we move to my parents house. I couldn't live alone, I was so scared (Ref 1).

One day I was shopping near my parents' house and suddenly a car beside me, they tried to ask me about a place. I did understand because of my husband's situation, I would not talk to anybody. But then, I didn't care about him. Two men came out they called my name, and they forced me to go inside the car. They took me to a place, I don't know, it was dark, one yellow light was dangling from the

ceiling. It was the driver he was standing in front of me, with a thick moustache, he called Hamsa (Ref 1).

The others, they were next the door, really, really disgusting. You are here, just for questions, just few questions. He start to show me photos, men in photos, I know some, one of them he was my husband's cousin (Ref 1).

Suddenly he slapped me, and pulled my hair, hit my head on the table, I could feel my front teeth, they broken. He said, uh you are not co-operating are you confused? I said yeah, I got a headache, can I get my purse back? He said no, I have aspirin for you. Again he pulled my hair back, then put a hand to my mouth, they forced me to swallow two tablets. After that I don't know how long it takes pushing, do not feel anything anymore (Ref 1).

I cannot see myself, I woke up in a bathtub with cold water running. All this blood where is it coming from. It was cold. I didn't know what was going on. I was hurting. I swear to God I didn't know, I was trying to control myself. It was cold. These things still now are scaring me. I hate bathtub, I hate cold water. These things remind me of these miseries (Ref 1).

Then there was a big woman, she was in front of me, she put a blanket on me, she said to me, if you co-operate, you might not suffer long. She took me again to this bloody Hamsa. We need you to sign these papers. They forced me to sign papers (Ref 1).

They gave me clothes, it wasn't my clothes. This woman help me, put me in a car, they throw me out somewhere. They told me they would come back to me. They throw me out the car, I didn't know where I was, or what day it was (Ref 1).

I saw a church in front of me, a Christian church, I recognised it, I try to find a way home. I found a taxi, first thing I ask him, what day is it? Saturday, they took me on Tuesday, four days, four days (Ref 1).

Zarah went through the first few days after her ordeal in a state of complete shock, but she never spoke of her experiences to anyone. In Iraqi society the 'ideology of shame and honour' is of extreme importance in shaping women's behaviour, especially with regards to sexual activity. If a woman behaves 'sexually dishonourably' it brings shame to all of her extended family (Langer, 2002: 280), and Zarah felt she could never tell anyone, not even her parents:

She knocked on my door, I told her I was ok, I could not speak with her, I said, go away, I'm coming down later. I don't know what to do, I just want to wash myself. I feel dirty. Not the dirty of not having a wash, no it was dirty of what happened to me (Ref 1).

When I left the bath, my father came, he said, I made my enquiries, I know where you were, just tell me. But in my country, in this situation, no woman can be raped. If you are raped you become nothing. Iraqi men, if they know their wife has been captured, they understand what happens in these places. It will destroy my life, my husband will know and his family, he will divorce and they will take my daughter from me (Ref 1).

It is quite understandable that Zarah never told her husband, family or anyone what had happened to her, and always managed to keep her experiences a secret from them, for fear of being completely excluded from her family and community.

This narrative became the basis of her claim for asylum. Zarah had to visit the Home Office, and re-tell her story a number of times, first for the Screening Interview, and then again for the Asylum Interview. The process, from the initial claim, to being given a decision on her case, took about 18 months.

The Asylum Decision

Zarah was at the Refugee Council office in Ferndale Road, Brixton, to try to resolve her housing situation, when she was told by a Refugee Council worker what had happened to her claim, and her first reaction was very happy:

My dear, you got Exceptional Leave to Remain. You can't believe I'm collapsed, can't stop crying, crying, all those people, they were looking, is that true? And when I left her office, I went outside, and I called my solicitor, and left a message about what I heard (Ref 1).

Her initial happiness soon disappeared after she spoke to her solicitor the next day:

Next day she called me, yeah I received it, and then my happiness it went. Why, first because they exclude my husband, secondly they only give me 6 months ELR. I said, give me reason (Ref 1).

The Home Office letter stated the reasons for giving her temporary leave instead of full Refugee Status, as follows:

First paragraph, they were repeating what I tell them. Second paragraph, however this lady explain, but we believe these people, they capture her for joy. Oh my God, this is the nation of law, the nation of justice, saying that Security Agency in Iraq they capture me, they rape me, just for joy. They can't find any bad womans in the street, they pick me up, just for joy. Why, who am I, Sophia Loren, or whoever (Ref 1)?

Zarah was refused full Refugee Status, because the Home Office case worker stated she was raped for the pleasure of her captors, not for political reasons, and therefore she could not be granted political asylum under the 1951 Geneva Convention. In the UK, there is a lack of understanding of women refugees, their reasons for fleeing their countries of origin, which has led to an asylum procedure that fails to recognize women as refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention (Asylum Aid, 2003).

In addition, as Zarah's case demonstrates, some case workers who make asylum decisions in the Home Office have little awareness of the fact that sexual violence is often used by persecutors as a State strategy to dehumanize women, and so destabilize whole communities. At times such violence has been interpreted as the impulsive actions by military or police officers towards women who just happen to be there (Crawley, 2001: 44). This reflects a wider problem of the difficulty of interpreting cases of sexual violence towards women within the 1951 Refugee Convention. 'Sexual violence frequently obscures the relationship between persecution and Refugee Convention

grounds’, and women who have suffered sexual violence often find that their experiences are not understood as linked to ‘religion, race, nationality, political opinion or a particular social group’, but as ‘random expressions of individual sexual violence’ (Crawley, 2001: 62).

In many situations, women may be persecuted simply for being the wife, mother or relative of a person who is deemed ‘dangerous’ or ‘undesirable’ by those in power, or as in Zarah’s story, to try to make them spy on their husband or other male relatives. Sexual violence against women is often meant to disrupt the social cohesion of a particular community. In many societies women who have been sexually abused become stigmatised, and ostracised by their family and their community. Persecutors in many countries are known to play on this fact (Crawley, 2001: 6, 42–45), as was the regime in Iraq at the time of Zarah’s imprisonment and rape. They used a ‘planned, systematic policy of demolishing family life’ by trying to make women spy on their husbands, and by abusing and dishonouring them (Langer, 2002: 280).

Violence and Credibility

In the second part of the Home Office letter, Zarah’s credibility is being questioned, which again demonstrates a lack of knowledge on the effects of rape on the life of a Muslim woman:

And then, then second thing, they say, we cannot believe how could this woman hide from her husband her fake teeth for all of these years. What they expect from a Muslim woman, oh look my front teeth is not real, and if he ask her why, what should she tell him, I fall down, or I’ve been raped and I’ve been hit, and abused and tortured by Security Agency. I can believe in European country you can say this, it can be accepted, but in my community you can not (Ref 1).

In the context of being a Muslim woman, and understanding the implications of having raped, Zarah lied to her husband, made up a story about why she has ‘fake teeth’, and tells about it as if making up a story about her teeth is quite a logical thing to do in her situation. From this perspective, she does not understand why the person who decided on her case should think that she would tell her husband about having been captured, assaulted and raped.

The comment in the Home Office letter regarding their disbelief of Zarah hiding her false teeth from her husband, is without grounds, it is arbitrary, as if they are looking for some lack of credibility in an otherwise solid asylum case, it seems as if ‘any attempt is made to discredit the applicant’ (Asylum Aid, 1999).

Zarah realises that the Home Office must be aware of the situation in Iraq, and what happens to the people of Iraq, including women:

I am quite sure the Home Office they are quite clever, they know exactly what is happening, what is happening in Iraq, of course in their documents they have this information, of course they know what is Saddam (Ref 1).

Zarah refused to even consider that the Home Office challenges the credibility of her story. And she continued to tell me how she made her claim consistent with evidence about her father’s execution, and how the case worker at the time had remembered his death, and had acknowledged her credibility:

Maybe it’s like manipulating, they know, but they don’t want to talk about it because they know exactly I’m genuine asylum seeker, genuine refugee. Because I provided for them documents, the most important thing during the interview, because my dad been executed it was in the newspapers, with 5 other men. The local newspaper mentioned that those people work against the government that’s

why we have to paralyse them for the freedom of our country. And the case worker she said to me yes I remember that, I remember that article. I will never forget it, I gave her my dad's name, and his friend's names, and the dates, and said they been executed. She said, yeah, yeah, Ode, Saddam's son, he had this operation, and he was so proud, to do such a thing, yeah I remember (Ref 1).

And quite rightly, Zarah challenges the fact she did not get Refugee Status. If they believed me, if they know I am a 'genuine' refugee, why can they not give me status? She then, in her quite traumatised, unstable emotional state, thinks they do not want her, and suspects that refugees from Iraq may not be given Refugee Status, because once it is *safe* in Iraq, the British government can start returning people:

If she remember, and she realised this then why they didn't give me refugee status? Because they don't want you, I can't understand their mentality, they believe what has happened to me, but they don't want to give it to me, they want to give me only 6 months, and now it is over. And the war is finished, and they're telling people go back to your country, it is safe....Safe, for me it is not safe!! This country I hope this is a nation of law and justice (Ref 1).

Even though the Home Office letter made some attempt to discredit Zarah's story, by challenging the fact she lied to her husband, her claim for asylum has always been accepted as a 'credible' story, even by the Home Office's own narrow guidelines for what is deemed to be 'credible'. Zarah, as she explained, made a solid claim, backed up her statement with documentary evidence, and managed to show proof of her father having been executed. She also had numerous reports and correspondence from the Medical Foundation about her traumatic experiences, and subsequent mental health situation.

Zarah's claim therefore seems to meet many of the requirements of the asylum policy framework, and where the refusal of full refugee status represents a wider problem

interpreting gender related issues within the 1951 Refugee Convention, especially issues of sexual violence, the offer of temporary leave exemplifies the fact that women are often considered ‘passive victims’, who are to be granted leave on humanitarian grounds, and not granted asylum as a political right (Schuster, 2003: 245).

Bob’s Story: Claiming Asylum in a Climate of Hostility

In Bob’s life story, we find a narrative of defending a claim for asylum on the basis of being involved in the political rallies that brought down Ceaușesku, at a time when post-communist Eastern European countries experienced immensely rapid political and social changes. As discussed in the previous chapter, Bob arrived in Britain in September 1990, with many other young men fleeing violence in Romania. Initially, they were a bit lost, they did not know what to do, or how to do it. After a few days, some of the young men traveled together to London to try to claim asylum.

They were advised by a Romanian organisation⁵⁴ to apply at the Refugee Council or at the Home Office. They decided to go to the Refugee Council office in Bondway, where they were interviewed, given accommodation, and told to report to the Home Office in Croydon the next day.

What Bob remembers mostly is the lack of information, neither the Refugee Council nor the Home Office workers explained to Bob and his companions what asylum was, what the process would be like, or what the consequences of their application might be for the future:

⁵⁴ *The Romanian Cultural Centre* in Regent Street

... they didn't advise us on what to do, what the procedure was. Eventually we were seen, over the counter, we handed in our passports, we were given an application form, and told to complete it, and return it. That was it. At that time we didn't understand what was asylum, what the system was about, the Convention, 'well founded fear of persecution', it was not explained (Ref 21).

You didn't understand that you became a refugee, we thought asylum was sanctuary, we gave up our passports, we didn't understand the implications. I just applied to the UK to have a place from where I could try to understand the situation in Romania, and find some safety (Ref 21).

The initial lack of information led to a very minimal understanding of the asylum procedure. In addition to this, the lack of explanation and understanding of the concept and politics of asylum had implications in a determination procedure that was to take seven years. Bob told the story of why and how he fled Romania as follows, and it is this sequence of events that became the basis of his claim:

I am a product of the fall of the Berlin Wall. I see myself as part of a revolution that brought an end to the Cold War. What happened was, people wanted change. That winter, we didn't expect it to happen, but the Ceaușesku regime fell. This, it changed me (Ref 21).

I'm from a quite middle class background in Romania. I was always told not to be involved, you'd end up in prison. But that December, when Ceaușesku fell, I became involved. I regret I didn't get involved at leadership level (Ref 21).

In my city over 40 people were shot. Two people I knew personally. One was my friend, she was shot for no reason, she was not involved in anything. The 'official' version is that we shot ourselves, but we had no guns (Ref 21).

Between January and May, the revolution unfolded, people started taking sides. Groups splintered, and fractions emerged. There were some former Communists, but also, what I was part of, some people who wanted society to change. We were building up to a more public statement (Ref 21).

The interim government was still ruled by Communists, strangely they still won the 'so-called' democratic elections. We wanted people like them not to be able to be in power. In May 1990 there was going to be a free election. We were demonstrating for 24 hours for our demands to be met. This was building up to a

huge confrontation, between a younger group, who wanted away with communism forever, and those still communist (Ref 21).

What they did to break the protest, they brought the miners in conflict with the students, it was the old conflict. The old class conflict, and old language was used. The miners invaded Bucharest, they used violence. This was before the elections. The government wanted to break the demonstrations before the elections. And people got hurt. The miners disbanded the demonstration. A lot of the accusations towards us were untrue (Ref 21).

The miners killed people, one of them is still in prison now. This was in the end of May, before the elections, then in early June a new president came to power, and he continued with the same approach. He controlled the media, he continued to arrest members of the opposition, but he couldn't do this on political grounds, more on the grounds of inciting to violence, not being allowed to demonstrate (Ref 21).

I became part of 'Vigilantes of Democracy'. We were active in my city, but most of activity moved to media. We were not so keen for socialism, nor for capitalism, but we wanted democracy. This was from June to September. They put out the bubble that we could have a social democracy in Romania, you know, perhaps like in Sweden. We were thinking things could not change (Ref 21).

Two years prior to the political upheaval in Romania, Bob had done his national service in the army for eighteen months. He had become injured, but served his time, and when he finished, he completed his degree at University. Whilst Bob was part of Vigilantes of Democracy, the new government tried different ways to keep 'troublemakers' at bay:

In 1990, at the end of August, with the new government in power they called me up to join the army again...You see, during the protests in our town, they photographed us a lot, they knew very well who we were. Calling me up for the army, it was a strategy, a way to get you out of the way, and stop your political involvement. I was called up to join the army for 18 months (Ref 21).

You have to go, if you don't go, it is like treason, you end up in prison. My option was to think about leaving. I have family both in Canada, and in America. The family in Canada invited me. But you have to apply for a visa, there was no time before the deadline of the army (Ref 21).

I didn't know what to do. I wasn't so much aware of what asylum was, I heard about it, about Germany, some Romanians ran to Germany. I saw it as related to Human Rights. I didn't know. For me it was about leaving the country, finding some sanctuary for a period of time (Ref 21).

Then, I saw this holiday to Britain advertised. It was a new thing then, a company would offer you 7 days holiday. I asked my mum for the money to leave, she accepted, she knew I wanted to leave. My father objected, he wanted me to go to the Army. I applied for a visa to Britain through the holiday reps (Ref 21).

Bob expresses again the sense of not knowing what to do, not being aware of what asylum exactly meant, he just thought he could find a place of safety for a while, so he could reflect on what had happened to him, and to his country. As his story unfolds, it becomes clear how important it is to him that he did not realise he would '*end up in Britain as an asylum seeker*', especially in the context of being thought of as a 'bogus' refugee.

First Refusal

Bob found out that his claim had been refused when he tried to apply for a work permit at the Home Office:

What happened, when my application was being considered, they wanted more details from me, and the Home Office contacted the Refugee Council. The Refugee Council had tried to contact me to let me know that the Home Office needed more information, but I didn't get letter from them (Ref 21).

The first application was turned down on the basis of non-compliance. It is vital that when the Home Office contacts an applicant for more details, they respond immediately, since any failure or hesitation to do so will immediately result in refusal, and in loss of credibility. However, if Bob had known the Home Office needed more information, he would have been happy to provide it:

I hadn't been informed by the Refugee Council, and I didn't know about this. Now (at the time of the interview) I would be more proactive, but at the time I just thought, 'why didn't anyone tell me' (Ref 21)?

Bob tells me he was always worried about being refused, because it put him *'more further down the line of deportation'*. He was now in a position of appeal, and was offered assistance through the UK Immigration Advisory Service, in Bermondsey. The interview for the appeal took place after two years, and it was during this interview he found out the Home Office had lost his passport. He waited another two years, and was then called for another interview:

This was the big interview, at Gatwick. But by this time I had become more informed, and I knew by this time, the Immigration Act was amended. For example they started this 'third country rule'. I was worried that my case would be put in a new asylum framework. I wanted my case to be looked at with the merits of 1990, of the time that it happened (Ref 21).

The interview at Gatwick took place in 1994, four years after Bob's arrival in Britain. During this time, the climate towards refugees and asylum seekers had become one of hostility and mistrust. Schuster (2003: 244) states how the label 'asylum seeker' evokes images such as 'cheat, liar, criminal, sponger – someone deserving of hostility by virtue not of any misdemeanour, but simply because he or she is an 'asylum seeker' – a figure that has by now become a caricature, a stereotype...', images of which Bob at the time of his interview was all too aware:

At the interview they stripped me, gave me a medical check up, and fingerprinted me. This was very humiliating. They treated me rudely, asked me where I was picked up. I told them I had been here for four years, and had claimed asylum then. But they treated me as if I was illegal, or 'bogus'. You know at the time, in the media, and politicians, always in these debates they talked about 'bogus' refugees. It made them treat you like, as if you were lying. I told them, I am not a

criminal, I don't see why I should be treated like a criminal, and I asked this to be put on my record, on the record of the interview (Ref 21).

The idea of 'bogus' asylum seeker, or 'economic' refugee had entered political and public discourses during the early 1990s. These images portray a person who comes to Britain, and makes a 'false' claim for asylum. Allegedly they pretend to be a refugee for political reasons, whilst the real motives for their migration are economic (Malmberg, 2004: 15).

I was so fed up with their attitude about 'bogus'. I told him what I thought about this 'bogus'. You see, I come from a middle class background in Romania. I did not grow up in poverty. At least there I could pay my bus fare. Here, I am not allowed to work, I could almost not afford the train journey to Gatwick, to come here for the interview (Ref 21).

Bob indicates quite strongly how the attitudes of the immigration officials upset him, and explains how he is not 'bogus', he did not have to come to Britain for economic reasons, he did not come from a poor background. He told me how it was here in Britain that he learned what poverty was. Other interviewees shared Bob's views of the term 'bogus asylum seeker' or 'benefit scrounger', for example, Abbas, like Bob, claims that for economic wealth, he would have been better off staying in Iraq:

Some refugees perhaps come for money, I do not know, for money I could have stayed in Iraq, the government pays a lot of money for Kurdish people to spy for them, to give them information on rebels (Ref 4).

Bob was not alone in having such feelings of indignity about his reasons for claiming asylum, and the hostile treatment he subsequently received, and the situation during the interview did not improve:

After this check up, I was interviewed. The officer doing the interview did not seem to be particularly knowledgeable about Romania. I was in a more confrontational mood, I felt he was going to say I was 'bogus'. He appeared to work the case according to a structure, working through this prepared questionnaire. I was not very prepared for this. I was not informed how to present my case (Ref 21).

These experiences, although unique to Bob, are not unusual. In the asylum determination process refugee narratives are told and interpreted within a culture where case workers are trained to approach asylum cases, and interview asylum seekers from a perspective of suspicion and disbelief (Jubany-Baucells, 2003: 115).

The interview lasted three hours, he thought he had all the information he needed. I could have told him more. His attitude constantly was that I am 'bogus', it was kind of confrontational. The questions he was asking were like in a framework. Also, sometimes he didn't know what he was talking about, or what to ask me, and he went a few times to ask his boss for help with something (Ref 21).

In addition to being interviewed by someone who was very unsympathetic, Bob found the interviewer also lacking in interviewing skills, and not up to date on 'country information'. There was a clear disparity between the basis of Bob's claim for asylum, and the Home Office's interpretation of 'persecution':

For me, I was going to prove that I wasn't going to join the army as the Romanian authorities had intended me to do. They would put me in prison not going. He wanted to know more about persecution. I had been a target of persecution, but as part of a group, not me as a target by myself (Ref 21).

Bob made his claim for asylum as being persecuted for his political opinion, his ethnic origin (Hungarian), and being conscripted in the army, to which he objected. He claims he would be imprisoned if he refused to go into the army. After the interviews for his appeal, he was refused Leave to Remain again:

In the letter of refusal it says 'the Secretary of State has doubt as to the credibility of your statement and the papers you have produced to support it'. They agreed I was called up to the Army, but did not think that this was because of my political activity. But, the authorities called me up for the Army as a strategy to destabilise the opposition, and persecution was linked to being 'conscripted' into the army. This is well documented material about Romania, especially during that time, there was a lot of 'old communist talk' in Romania, to deal with the 'enemy within'. And, I had documents to support my claim (Ref 21).

Bob was refused Leave to Remain upon appeal, because the asylum decision maker doubted the credibility of his statement and the documents he used as supporting evidence. Significantly however, and a matter of disappointment to Bob, 'in 1994 the Netherlands and Belgium were still granting asylum to refugees from Romania' (Ref 21).

After this refusal, Bob had another interview at the Home Office in 1995, and was refused again. He appealed again, but this time his case was handled by UKIAS. They interviewed him, but also people who had known him in Romania, and here in the UK. In the meantime, Bob had become more disillusioned with his application procedure, which had already taken five or six years. He tells me how people made mistakes, and how he would like more control over his case:

By this time I was more disappointed with the system, that my side of the story was not heard.....I wanted to know what they were going to say, and how they would represent me in court. I wanted some more control over my own case, but UKIAS did not let me. I wanted to bring some issues into my adjudication but they wouldn't let me. I felt they would lose as well, they worked in the framework of the system. You either fitted into this system to an extent, or....I don't know (Ref 21).

I tried to put some points into my case, for example, the Magna Carta, the idea of justice, I felt they did me an injustice to make my case take so long. It is like losing six years. But everyone works in the framework of the Home Office, UKIAS, lawyers. And it is very hard to fit in this framework (Ref 21).

Bob was by now very aware of how difficult it is to meet the requirements of the 1951 Convention as interpreted within the British asylum policy framework, which became ever tighter as his asylum procedure continued. Then, in 1997 the law changed, and Bob came to be in a position to apply for a visa on the basis of being self-employed. Eventually, he traded off his claim for asylum for a self-employment visa.

Several issues impacted negatively on Bob's asylum determination procedure. The initial lack of information and limited understanding of how the system worked, led to Bob not knowing what was expected of him as an asylum seeker. When the Refugee Council failed to notify him of a Home Office letter, he was refused on the grounds of non-compliance, when many of his Romanian contemporaries were being granted asylum. After this initial episode, Bob's claim was caught up in the hostile climate surrounding asylum seekers, which was continuously fed through extremely negative discourses about 'bogus' refugees. In this 'culture of disbelief', his story was never given the fair hearing it was entitled to.

Conclusion

This chapter started by arguing that asylum seekers lose their individuality and become a 'case', in need of being '... classified, normalized, excluded, etc'. Their individual experiences become objectified, since the asylum procedure makes asylum seekers the 'object of individual descriptions and biographical accounts' (Foucault, 1984), which becomes the basis of their claim for asylum. This is where the subjective experiences of the individual refugee encounter the objectifying requirements of asylum policy as a structural process, which makes the procedure of claiming asylum is an exceptional part of

law. In addition, applications are considered for eligibility for refugee status within an extremely rigid policy framework that seems more concerned with establishing who is not telling a 'credible' story, and will not be considered a 'genuine' refugee, than with offering a place of safety to those in need.

Refugee narratives have been interpreted in relation to the claiming of asylum within the British policy framework, and the issue of 'credibility' of refugee stories in the asylum determination procedure has been explored, by examining the 'route' of three individual refugee narratives through the asylum decision making process. Findings demonstrate that where there are discrepancies between claims for asylum, and the requirements of the 1951 Refugee Convention, as interpreted through British asylum policy, this is not necessarily because asylum seekers are not telling 'true' or 'accurate' stories, nor is it because their claims are not based on a 'well-founded fear of persecution'.

Instead, it is difficult to harmonize the subjective life stories of refugees with the objective structural process that is the asylum procedure. Research findings suggest that personal issues, such as Moayad's mental health problems, or cultural differences, which emerged in the way Moayad told his story, played a key role in his case receiving a 'first refusal'. In Zarah's case, although her confusion, personal issues and mental health problems also impacted on her asylum procedure, her claim did not match Home Office requirements for gender related issues. The refusal of full refugee status seems to represent a wider problem of interpreting gender related issues within the 1951 Refugee Convention, especially issues of sexual violence. Finally, Bob's claim did not manage to

meet the requirements of the Refugee Convention or British asylum policy, for his claim came to be caught up in the hostile climate surrounding asylum seekers.

All three participants had to become pro-active in their dealing with the Home Office, they had to take control of their 'case', control of their story as the basis for their claim for asylum. However I feel taking control of their case does not imply that they could now tell their story freely, instead taking control of their story meant learning to tell it within the narrow confines of the asylum policy framework in Britain. Portelli (1998: 26; see also Powles, 2004) suggests that any life history can be placed on a spectrum between lived stories and told stories, and that telling stories is about 'real' events as well as about constructing the self. In ascertaining to which extent a refugee life is 'told' by underlying structural processes, or the extent to which refugees are free to tell the stories of their experiences, I would argue that refugee stories as the basis for the claim for asylum during the asylum determination procedure are mostly shaped by the parameters of British asylum policy. Although claimants need to be *active* during the processing of their claim, this activity is directed towards learning to tell their stories in a way that suits the needs of the Home Office. Since the sharing of experiences is so important for the process of 'narrative knowing', for making sense of the self, I believe that refugees are denied the opportunity to make sense of themselves and of the situation they are in, because they have very little scope for telling their stories freely.

Chapter Seven

TELLING NEW STORIES, MAKING NEW LIVES

Introduction

The telling of stories is a crucial dimension of human life, since it is the way in which individuals give meaning to their experiences, and learn to make sense of the world around them. Stories are not only essential in developing a healthy sense of self, the process of sharing personal experiences is of vital importance in meeting people and making friendships. For refugees who have arrived in a new country, sharing experiences is important, since it facilitates developing contacts into existing networks, making links into the host community, and finding one's way into a new society. Furthermore, telling personal stories has the potential to pose a challenge to the dominant images that permeate asylum and immigration discourses. When refugee stories feed into communities that will listen to them, and find an audience, they may open up spaces where their voices can be heard. Enabling individual narratives of marginal groups to be told, and breaking the silence surrounding socially excluded lives is part of the political process in a Western democracy, and a way of achieving social and political justice (O'Neill and Harindranath, 2006). Indeed, some would argue that in a globalised world it is the extent to which a person has the capacity to control the story of their lives which has come to be seen as 'a major mode of empowerment' (Plummer, 1995: 144-145), and the sharing of personal experiences within the public domain has the potential to have an incredible impact.

However, the stories of refugees and asylum seekers remain subjected to a network of power relations. Refugees have little freedom to tell the stories of their lives in their own words. They lack the capacity of *agency* in shaping and constructing their own life, and have little impact on their political and social circumstances. Instead, refugee lives are mostly represented by others, mainly as part of a political strategy to control their entry into Britain, and their lives whilst their claim is being considered. For example, as discussed in the previous chapter, the way in which personal stories of refugees have to be told within the incredibly tight criteria of the Home Office in order to be deemed credible is extremely detrimental to refugee lives, and significantly hampers the settlement process in Britain.

When there is limited scope for refugees and asylum seekers to tell their stories, and restricted access to a potentially sympathetic audience, they are denied any control over what their lives will be like when they settle here, ‘there is no selfhood apart from the collaborative practice of figuration’, and their lives become the product of the constant negotiation between the self and the ‘histories, experiences.....texts, conduct, gestures, objectifications’ of others (Battaglia, 1995: 2, cited in O’Neill and Harindranath, 2006: 44). Since more powerful voices have easier access to audiences willing to listen, are more capable of controlling which issues will be on the political agenda, and have more influence on the kind of language in which certain issues will be discussed, the extent to which refugees have the freedom to shape their lives within this network of power relations is the crucial issue under scrutiny in this study.

In this chapter I will explore how refugees manage to tell their stories, and share their experiences, in order to find support in building their lives. It will discuss how people manage to overcome barriers to settlement, how they find information, learn to access services, and begin to find numerous and imaginative strategies in making new lives. In addition, since the telling of personal stories has the potential to challenge taboos, raise awareness, and bring about social and political change, I will explore how the participants who contributed to this study used the sharing of their experiences as a tool to not only shape their lives, but become personally and politically empowered.

Integration through Sharing of Stories

Within the framework of power relations surrounding refugee narratives, refugees are often portrayed as ‘passive needy victims’ (Turton, 2003: 7; see also chapter five). Since the settlement process in Britain has come under higher levels of state control through a series of policy measures since the early 1990s, the role of the refugee as a ‘passive victim’ is sustained, because they are kept completely separate from the host community, and are not required to actively seek to make a new life. It becomes almost inevitable that refugees come to be seen as a burden on society. Although they are often victims of violence, this does not imply that they will be helpless in all other areas of their lives, and the image of the ‘helpless refugee’ does not seem justified. Instead, refugees may have had some ‘choice’ in the course of events, may have made some decisions in the process of becoming a refugee. Overlooking their capacity to think and act for themselves, denies them any opportunity in being ‘agents’ (ibid, 2003: 7), in actively telling their stories, and shaping their lives.

Thinking about refugees as agents acknowledges their creativity and imagination in making new lives, and rewriting their life histories. In addition, regarding new arrivals as capable individuals will help them cope with the new struggles that day-to-day life brings in the chaos that people find upon arrival in a new country (Soguk, 1999: 4-5). In fact, refugees manage to find their way into a host society, achieve much higher levels of social and economic integration, and feel more of a sense of belonging if they have had the opportunity to build new lives in a less structured, state controlled policy setting of integration (Korac, 2003; Ghorashi, 2005; Malkki, 1991, 1995; see also chapter four).

Many recent studies have indicated the need for a personal dimension within the process of integration. A qualitative study for the Home Office (Ager and Strang, 2004a), which researched the experience of integration in Islington and Pollokshaws, of both host communities and refugees, highlighted that for both groups issues such as safety and stability, language, and advice and cultural understanding were of extreme importance. More significantly though, personal relationships were crucial in establishing a sense of belonging, and a feeling of being integrated. The findings of this study have added a personal dimension to the perhaps more formal, structural definition of integration, including the notion of having social relationships with members of their own community as well as with members of other communities.

People feel more integrated when they can share their experiences with those that live in the same neighbourhoods, or if they can make friends in their immediate environment, not just with members of their own community, but also with members of the host community. However, the move towards a highly state controlled reception strategy that

the British government seems to have adopted is in direct contrast to these recent debates of integration, since separation of new arrivals from the host community through rigid structural barriers, reflects the lack of a space, or a platform where citizens and refugees can meet and socialize, which Kushner (2006: 198–199) explains as ‘the absence of a national narrative framework’ in British history. Stories are rarely shared, because there is very little scope in society for refugees and asylum seekers to mix with members of the host population, and no need for the sharing of personal experiences, the forming of friendships or close personal ties.

Although recent studies have brought a personal element to the concept of integration, the main focus is on what makes people feel integrated, and what the indicators of an integrated community might be. There seems to be little discussion of the ways in which individual refugees become integrated, how difficult it is to find your way in an environment where you do not understand or speak the language, the barriers they face in accessing services, and the strategies they adopt to make new lives. Often the community or social networks are mentioned as a strategy to enhance settlement, such as in a study of the life stories of refugees by Williams (2006), who explores how refugees use social networks as an important resource to achieve integration.

However, not all immigrants have ready-made communities or other social networks at their disposal, and most can only rely on themselves for support. Since the focus of this study is the *individual life story*, I will explore how refugees adopt *individual* strategies to overcome barriers, and find their way into society as individuals. In this context, this chapter engages with the ways in which refugees manage to find imaginative ways of

making new lives in a society that is often hostile towards them, and it aims to explore the extent to which refugees become personally empowered through sharing their personal stories, and the political or social impact this has on the social worlds they live in.

Refugees as Agents: Individual Strategies in Making New Lives

The early stage of settlement is shaped by a variety of influences. In chapter five I described how the turmoil that has entered people's lives continues after their arrival on British shores. The sense of fear that shadowed them in their homelands, has followed them to their new destination, and there is still a sense of chaos, which is consolidated by not speaking English. People experience a feeling of loss, and find it difficult to learn to find their way, because they cannot communicate with anyone. In this situation, they have to enter the asylum seeking process, and engage with the trials and tribulations of dealing with the Home Office.

Participants expressed that they had problems initially because of not speaking English, having little knowledge of what to do, and generally finding it difficult to access services. It is during this initial time of disorientation that refugees need to engage with not only with the Home Office, but also with the institutions of the welfare state, in order to start re-building their lives.

In the stories told as part of this study, a diverse array of barriers affected the settlement of refugees. Often it is not just one factor that hinders refugees to find their way in a new society. Instead, it is a complex set of different influences that shape people's lives. Apart from personal issues such as fear, traumatic experiences, or mental health, there are the

issues of community, health (and health services), culture, and language, which affect the settlement process. However, for many people it is the lack of information about how to access services, or where to find help with claiming asylum, health problems, education, learning English and so forth that is the main problem.

The following part of this chapter will consider the narratives of five people, who all faced a complex set of barriers to making some kind of life for themselves and for their families. It will draw attention to the often quite imaginative strategies people devise, and highlight that although many participants found their feet, for most it came at tremendous cost. Amira's story involves her activities to facilitate the settlement of her children, at which she was very successful, but she showed me the place in her garden where she cried every evening for a number of years. The detrimental housing situation of Natalya, which she eventually solved, caused her severe stress, and she suffered health problems for a few years. Anna, who needed a long time to find her feet, had a miscarriage because she lacked the confidence to demand more appropriate health care during her pregnancy. Hope, although she manages to support families who live with HIV/Aids, is very ill, and without any immigration status, which often makes her question the reality of her life. Finally, Mo has been the main carer for his mum and his siblings since early childhood, and now has a very meaningful role in working to support youth groups amongst the most disadvantaged communities in London. However, his mum still suffers serious mental health problems, and Mo never managed to learn to read and write, and overcome his illiteracy.

Amira: Settling in as a Family

Amira's story described the traumatising journey (see chapter five) she made from Kosovo with her family, and how they arrived in Britain. She also told how their initial arrival was facilitated by various people. For refugees from Kosovo, specific programmes of assistance were set up. Amira's family had assistance with 'structural' matters, such as claiming asylum at the Home Office, housing, filling out forms for schools for her children, forms for registering with the GP, and applying for a National Insurance number. Although they received quite a lot of assistance with formal aspects of initial settlement, Amira found the experience of adapting to a new situation extremely traumatic, for herself and for her children.

There are three different narratives of integration that run through the story of how Amira and her family found their way into British society. Firstly, it tells the narrative of her two teenage daughters, and the extent to which they should enjoy their freedom in a society with a completely different set of cultural norms for teenagers than what they were used to in Kosovo. Secondly, Amira describes the experiences of her son, who was nine years old when they arrived in Britain, and who found settling into a new life extremely hard, for reasons of not speaking English and being completely isolated at his new school. The narrative of Amira's own journey into a new life, only begins to emerge after she had facilitated the settlement of her children. A theme that recurs in all three the different parts of Amira's story is gender, and how her role as a mother shaped the way that she found her way into British society. However, the story also suggests that this is not seeing gender as problematic, but as enhancing her sense of agency.

Youth Culture

Amira started, very early on in the interview, to illustrate the secure structure of community life in Kosovo, and explained quite clearly how important this was for the way children are raised. She contrasts this picture of social order with a completely different set of social norms and values for young people in Britain:

I am from a small village, I know everybody, everybody knows each other, and also each other's background, and family. You always know your children they are safe, someone will always look out for them. Here, my children with children, I don't know their families, their parents, nothing. Here you don't know what your children are doing. Here, more difficulty to for children to do well, they have more freedom, also you can't discipline in the same way, need to find other way to make them do good, here there is more freedom, and more temptation (Ref 20).

In this context, Amira explained how she and her husband found it difficult to know which amount of freedom to give to their two teenage daughters. In a culture where there is more freedom and more temptation for teenagers, and also, less knowledge of where they are, and less social control, they needed to learn to 'adaptate' to a different set of rules:

.....in my country, we cannot let out girls after 9pm. My husband was a teacher in my country for 27 years. When we came here he had to move (change), allow daughter out after 9pm. Here you can, for party, or birthday. It was very hard to adapt (Ref 20).

She realised that for her daughters to settle and make friends, she and her husband needed to let go, perhaps be more flexible, and as an imaginative strategy to adjust to a new situation she searched for information about the 'temptations' in Western society, and found different ways of keeping track of their daughters' whereabouts, such as mobile phone contact:

With the freedom and temptation they have here, I got information about everything, about smoking, drink, drugs.....You cannot keep the same here as in Kosovo. In this country, we don't know the people. But, she has telephone, and 12 o'clock home, they have to be here (Ref 20).

Amira came from a society with a strong social order, in which young women would not be out late, and where social control would prevent their safety being compromised. By learning about smoking, drink and drugs, as well as finding new ways of communication, and exercising at least some form of control, she managed to let her daughters go out, and adapt to a new way of living.

Making Friendships across Communities

Whilst she was dealing with the needs of her two daughters, her nine year old son suffered some severe distress because he could not speak English, and could not make new friends in his school:

When I came, my son was 9 years old, he went to primary school. He was so stressed and depressed, because of the language barrier, he didn't eat or sleep. He couldn't talk nothing. You know the refugee people in his school, they were Somali or Pakistani, he said: 'they don't play with me, and nobody talk to me'. He was very depressed. He said: 'What shall I do, can I talk with my uncle in Kosovo, he can give me gun, then I can kill them. Why did you bring me here?' He was terrified, very far away. In the beginning, language so difficult, we were so stressed and depressed, too much, I don't want to remember (Ref 20).

It became evident in how she found a solution for the situation with her daughters that Amira is quite apt at taking measures to resolve issues for her children, and she was also pro-active at helping him to settle in. She adopted different strategies, but firstly she approached his teacher:

I went to speak to head teacher, explain to her everything, maybe he need special attention, for language, and for being scared (Ref 20).

In the meantime, she realised that British society is different from Kosovan village life, especially in West London, where social life is made up of many different communities. In her son's school, refugees immigrants were mainly from Pakistani and Somali background. Amira was never negative in any way about this, but decided that if life here was different, she and her family would have to learn about it. As an individual strategy to settle her family into British society, and specifically to help her son settle in and make new friends, she spoke to her neighbours, made links with different families of different backgrounds, and formed friendships with parents/carers across communities:

Here children out with children from different backgrounds, I am not racist, I like, Somali, English, Pakistani, I just needed to learn about it. Now he's very close with Somali and Pakistani people, he brings them always here, now he's very friendly with them (Ref 20).

A recent study by the Refugee Council and the University of Birmingham (Atfield et al, 2007: 61) emphasizes the view that engagement with, and knowledge of the variety of communities and their cultures in Britain is very important for the integration and a sense of belonging of refugees. It is however, not an issue that is widely explored in research into the integration of refugees, especially not from the perspective of the individual. Nobody told Amira how to make such links, she did this by herself, without any external advise or support, and she was very successful at reaching out across communities, forming friendships for her son, and social networks for herself.

Gender and Integration

Amira displayed incredible strength in facilitating the settlement and integration of her children, and her narrative is also the narrative of her children. However, she also remembers the times that it was very difficult, especially waiting for a decision from the

Home Office, and she showed me the corner of the garden where she would go every evening after dinner to have a cry by herself, until only the year before I met her:

I am very thankful to Home Office, but they give me very stress and very depressed. Now children are good, but it was little bit long time waiting. To come from war country is very bad, but to wait long time is also very bad. Decision could be more quickly, because adaptation can be better (Ref 20).

In her role as mother, Amira needed to address the integration issues of her children before she could think of her own way into British society, and in this way her narrative is permeated by issues of gender. However, I would not consider the delay of Amira's personal integration a consequence of gender-related oppression or discrimination, rather her role as mother encouraged her to accept different cultural norms for teenage girls, and to make links with other families, and friendships with other parents. I would argue therefore that in Amira's case gender enhanced the process of integration.

In many ways, Amira became quite empowered through having to devise different strategies to overcome the difficulties she and her family faced. It is not unusual for refugee women to find some empowerment in learning to live in a new country, and some would argue that refugee women show their resilience by their very survival (Forbes Martin, 1992: 89; 2003), and that this continues in empowering them in their new lives. Amira, once her children were settled, attended different courses, and now is heavily involved in voluntary work where she gives advice on the basis of her own personal experiences, especially where it is related to the integration of refugees:

Now I want to give back, I don't want to be parasite, I want to give help myself. I like to educate myself, then work for children, old people, disabled people. I finish courses, Community Advocacy, Interpreting, also did two years of mentoring. And,

I want to work with women, women refugees, keep in touch with people from different cultures. I always read books, magazines, anything. It is interesting, how to adaptate to new society (Ref 20).

For the last three years Amira has been active in giving her time and expertise to help women with a range of different issues, both in a general woman's group, and in a group specifically for Albanian women, who meet more for cultural reasons:

For three years I am volunteer in Woman's Group in Hillingdon, helping people to get help, with immigration advice, domestic violence, pregnancy. Also in Albanian Woman's Group, for our culture, our music, our dance. We have parties sometimes (Ref 20).

Amira, as the mother of the family, before she could begin to think about her own settlement into a new society, had to think about the needs of her children first, and how to facilitate their acclimatisation to a new situation. Her pro-active engagement with the world around her enabled the settlement process of her children. The question is however, did Amira become empowered through the sharing of her experiences? And, did this have any impact on British society?

In light of becoming culturally aware in order to change her attitude towards teenage life in Britain, as well as engaging with social cohesion issues as an individual strategy to enhance the integration of her son, and attending many courses geared towards language and community advocacy skills, I would argue that although Amira's individual experiences perhaps do not have enough impact to provoke social change on a grand scale, in Amira's immediate environment, the pro-active engagement with the world around her influences social life on a small scale. Making friendships with people from different backgrounds, then using her skills and experiences to support people with

advice on immigration, domestic violence and other women's issues, is politically empowering on a small scale. It may not change national or international politics, but it definitely has an impact on her family, the people that she meets, supports and socialises with, the Women's Group that facilitates the contact, and the wider community in her local area.

Natalya: Overcoming Problems of Housing

Natalya's story tells of the very detrimental effects of a bad housing situation, and although she experienced a very different set of barriers to settlement, like Amira, she also needed to explore imaginative strategies in order to establish some sense of belonging for herself and her family.

Natalya's husband came here by himself late December 1999, and because it was Christmas time it took a few days before he could see an immigration officer at Heathrow, who told him to stay somewhere for one night, and come back the next day. He was not given the proper documentation, and when he returned the next day he was not given accommodation from NASS, and he was not fixed with any borough. He stayed in a friend's house, from where he moved into private accommodation, a small room in Southall, which the landlord rented out to him as a one bedroom flat. Natalya describes her experiences of coming to Britain, and the poor conditions she had to live in with her husband and two children as follows:

It was my decision to follow him. At the time, my daughter was three, and my son one and a half years old. We came here, and then the nightmare started.....It was just one small room, but the landlord put in some partitioning, and he rent it like a one bedroom flat. We had a kitchen with rats, not even kitchen, but a little cooker in the corner, it was very dirty. We lived there for one and a half years. We had a lot

of problems with the landlord, and we had to go and find out about rights.... If I had known before the nightmare, I would not have come (Ref 17).

Natalya tried to find help with her housing situation, but found it difficult to find any form of support. The council would not help them, unless they became homeless. The landlord, who wanted them out of his property, changed tactics, and tried to scare them out of the flat:

Then he became dangerous. He started to cut electricity, but I fixed it. Then he cut the gas, and we fixed it. And, one day he sent three men to kick us out. I was so scared, for me, for my children. They threaten us, did not hit us, but we were scared (Ref 17).

The situation escalated even more when Natalya needed to go to the hospital for a few days, and they were evicted:

When I came out, they threw all our stuff out on the street. For 5 days we were living in the street with the children. We went to the council, to ask them to give us accommodation. They did not give it to us. Instead they told us to get a solicitor. We found one, and he organised for the police to come, they told him to re-open the door (Ref 17).

They were returned to the small room, but the situation with the landlord did not improve, he did not change his behaviour, and the room was still inappropriate housing for a family of four. Natalya feels that as asylum seekers, no one was interested in helping them, and she identifies the lack of English, lack of information, and perhaps attitudes towards asylum seekers as the main obstacles, because these were the barriers that prevented her from accessing appropriate services:

The problem was, our English was very poor. We had some help, the doctor, the health visitor, they helped, but not enough. No one ever told us any information about where to find help, where to find refugee projects you know that can help

you, that help asylum seekers. I think it is because they are fed up with asylum seekers, maybe sometimes even abuse them (Ref 17).

Natalya tried to find help, she talked about her problems with her GP and the Health Visitor, who should have referred her to appropriate services who support refugees, but didn't. She did not find support, because as she claims, those who were supposed to support her were 'fed up' with asylum seekers. In my view, the perception of asylum seekers amongst the people that were supposed to help her, the audience for her story, was so much shaped by the extremely negative images that prevail in asylum discourses, that they were unwilling to listen, and they treated her as if she were quite 'undeserving' of assistance. Natalya's housing situation actually changed when they finally found someone who would listen. A person from the AAL (Afghan Association of London) supported them, and helped them with writing letters, and eventually they were given a housing association flat in Southall, which was specifically available for a refugee family with two children under the age of five:

We got it, it was like the lottery, it was like winning the lottery. A huge gift for us (Ref 17).

In Natalya's case, the services were available, but difficult to find, and apart from not being listened to, as Natalya would say, the biggest obstacle to integration and to having a 'full life' was the lack of information about where to find appropriate services, and how to access them:

The biggest problem was that there was lack of information. We would have liked to have a full life from the beginning. I looked for information, I found information in the library, information about language, how to do with schools. I would go to the library with the children to be warm (Ref 17).

Natalya's story indicates that she never gave up, she realises that they should have had a right to and support for a 'full life' from the beginning.

Making New Networks

The new flat meant a turning point in Natalya's life, in a way similar to what Denzin names the *epiphany* (1989: 70), a moment in a person's life which marks a significant change. A critical moment, in which the person's character begins to emerge, and where 'fundamental meaning structures' (ibid) begin to change. For refugees housing is one of the most important constituents to a successful settlement, and crucial in creating a sense of safety, but also in having a base from which to rebuild a life (Zetter and Pearl, 1999; Kissoon, 2006). It is therefore not surprising that for Natalya, the new flat made her decide that her life and that of her family would change, and from being a person that things would happen to (the passive recipient of experiences), she became more pro-active and in control of her life:

But then, when we had new flat, I decided, things would change. And when we had new flat, my husband worked jobs like cleaner, minicab driver, such things. For me it was impossible to work with two children. But, when I couldn't work, I just studied, took English classes, so long the waiting lists you would not believe, and some very bad teachers. But I also took computer classes, IT courses, even Engineering (Ref 17).

As Natalya felt more empowered, her character began to materialise even more, and she began to share her experiences with others, which led to the setting up of a Russian language school for children:

Then, I started to help some friends with children. It was Christmas then, we hired a hall, and had a Christmas tree, and then this plan came to organise something. I began collecting information, information about helping people, and slowly, slowly,

I became like a leader. The first thing important it was language, Russian language for children. Then one day, decided to open my own school (Ref 17).

Natalya for the first few years experienced quite extreme hardship because of her housing situation. She did not find help, but had to learn to help herself. In doing so, she formed a network, and started a school, which also functioned as a vehicle where refugees and asylum seekers could find advice and support for many issues related to integration. The school is run by volunteers, and many refugees can do voluntary work in order to build up some work experience, which enables them to find paid employment later on. In this setup, people share experiences, and learn from each other what the best way is to find your feet.

As in the story of Amira, Natalya's story is one of a surprising strength, agency, and inventiveness, but she still reflects on her experiences as follows:

If I had known what would happen, I would never have come to this country, to be an asylum seeker, or a refugee. It is like being blind, like to have problems in all areas of life (Ref 17).

Natalya's life for a couple of years after she came to Britain, resembled a situation where she had very little control over what would happen to her and her children. In addition, she found it very hard to find any sympathy, even amongst those, like health service providers, who were supposed to help her. She described the plight of the asylum seeker as 'being blind, like to have problems in all areas of life', which sums up very well not only her feelings, but also those of most of the participants to this study.

In Natalya's story we see a real 'epiphany' moment, when she began to feel empowered, and saw the return of some influence over her life, when they were given a flat, she said

‘I decided things would change’, and they did. Not only did she manage to turn her family’s life around, she shared her experiences with others in similar situations in order to change their lives for the better too. Again, the telling of her story may not change the lives of all asylum seekers in this country, the work she does affects many people, as the following participant will tell.

Anna: The Importance of Confidence

Anna arrived in Britain in 1993, and identified language as a main barrier to her settlement. She told me it took until 1995 to find appropriate classes for learning English, when she finally managed to enrol on some summer courses. Anna continued her story by emphasizing how especially her lack of confidence alongside of a lack of information became a major hindrance to finding some work:

For two years I looked for something to do, I am a skilled professional, an Educational Psychologist. For example, I went to Next Step, an organisation, a project in Hounslow, they do Refugee Employment Advice, they say, my English not good, they had not much confidence. They give appointment, but person did not show up. Then I went to a Community Centre in South Acton, when I came there, they told me I was in wrong place, and I needed Next Step (Ref 19).

Anna seemed quite shocked at her own sense of ‘victimhood’, and still now finds it hard to believe that she allowed herself to be sent from pillar to post in this way, and highlights her lack of confidence:

Now I can’t believe I did that, I am an educated person, but no confidence. Other asylum seekers have worse, much worse experiences (Ref 19).

Apart from problems in accessing language training, and services to assist with employment, Anna told me of her experiences of the health service, which in her case

resulted in the loss of a baby. She claimed she never speaks of this, and was not planning to tell me of these experiences at all, but as she was telling me her life story, it was almost as if she couldn't help herself. She became very emotional whilst telling me this part of the story, and initially it was difficult to understand exactly what had happened, she became very erratic. However, although very emotional, Anna was quite clear that what happened to her was because of lack of information, and inadequate command of the English language:

We had some traumatic experiences. Because of lack of information, because of immigration status, because of no English. When I was pregnant, I had no good support from NHS. I did not know where to go. Later on in pregnancy, there was problem, I went to midwife, doctor, but they tell me, I was ok. You see I had no confidence to deal with them, now perhaps I would challenge them, tell them I needed medical attention, but then....no confidence. Then later, problem became worse and in the end I lost the baby (Ref 19).

The findings in a study for the Maternity Alliance (McLeish, 2002) demonstrated that during the time that Anna had her traumatic experiences of pregnancy and miscarriage, maternity services in the NHS largely ignored the special needs of pregnant asylum seekers. These inadequate services are understood to be one of the consequences of a support system which is designed to have a deterrent effect on those trying to claim asylum in the UK. Maternity services often failed to meet basic needs, and many participants experienced neglect, disrespect and racism. Furthermore, whilst many pregnant asylum seekers were not given clear and accessible information on GP, maternity, health visiting and child health services, services for interpreting and advocacy support was often insufficient (McLeish, 2002). This clearly shows that Anna was not alone in experiencing poor treatment by the various maternity services in the NHS. Anna however, situates her experiences in the wider context of her life as an asylum seeker:

I had miscarriage, but not only that, bad situation. I was a professional, working in my country. Here I could not speak English, and we had no immigration status (Ref 19).

Perhaps it is similar to the feeling Natalya describes *being an asylum seeker is like being blind, like having problems in all areas of life* (Ref 17), which relates quite strongly to the sense of not being in control of one's life, and not knowing how to become empowered enough to begin to rebuild your life.

By 2000, after seven years here, Anna still had no decision from the Home Office, she could not go to see her family, and still found it difficult to find work, or to feel confident. She completed a course with British Airways, which qualified her to work as a travel agent, but when she looked for work, she was told her accent was too strong:

Could not find anything, my accent was very strong, and I was not so confident. I applied as a Customer Service Assistant, but did not see it through, then I just gave up (Ref 19).

The lack of confidence that permeated Anna's life stayed with her for seven or eight years, and it made her start new things, then giving them up. For Anna there wasn't an epiphany moment as for Natalya, and things changed more gradually, although the fact that she and her family were given ILR in 2000, and the subsequent visit to her family in Russia helped her a lot.

Anna finally found a part time job in a music shop, for three years. Here she gradually regained some of her confidence and as her English improved, did some interpreting for Russian people, and eventually she met Natalya, because her daughter was attending classes at the Russian language school. Anna started volunteering at the school, and since

then, Anna and Natalya together have expanded the service considerably. They both feel that what happened to them was because of a lack of information, and want to provide the services to asylum seekers and immigrants that they themselves could not access:

Since 2004 I am volunteering for Natalya, we decided to do something for people like us. What happened to me was through lack of information. Then, apart from the school, we started to provide information, giving some computer and English classes. Now the service is just to give information and advice to people, but in future, perhaps also to try to get professionals into work. Natalya and I did NVQ level 4, in Advice and Guidance. At REAP, I also did Community Advocacy Classes, English, and Emotional Wellbeing, which finished in December 2004. In 2005 I volunteered for them as well, I made a directory (Ref 19).

Anna, in a vein similar to Amira and Natalya, managed to turn her life around, albeit at a great cost. She also describes a period of about seven years, of feeling quite lost, not having any control or confidence. Once Anna started some work, learned English, and met Natalya, she became empowered enough to share her experiences with others in a similar situation. Anna and Natalya have understood quite well what new communities need in terms of services, and they have become educated and skilled in passing on this knowledge, so that others do not have to have their experiences. This may not be challenging the political status quo with regards to asylum seekers, but it does support, and perhaps empower those people that come to them for advice and assistance.

Hope: Living with HIV/Aids

Hope came to Britain a few times in 1999, and finally claimed asylum here in 2000. At the time of interview in 2005, she had been waiting for a decision by the Home Office for five years. Hope's claim has been refused, because she travelled back to Zambia a few times. She did not initially come here to claim asylum, but for HIV treatment. She had a good job and family in Zambia, and initially believed she would return to her life there.

However, because of the stigma attached to HIV/Aids she found no support in Zambia at all, not from the health services, not from voluntary organisations, even her family would not look after her. Another problem in the asylum claim is that she returned to Zambia to collect her daughter just before she submitted her claim. Her solicitor advised her that she may not see her child for a long time once she claimed asylum, but Hope would not leave her, because she did not trust what might happen in the future. Hope realises the legal dimension of claiming asylum, and states that the law is perhaps not made for the individual:

So, I went back to Zambia, I bent the rules of asylum. Home Office now says, we refuse you asylum because you went back several times. But, I went back for my daughter, then my family, they push me out, and I came back with child. The laws does not recognise the problems of a person (Ref 11).

Because she suffers from the HIV/Aids virus, Hope is on quite strong medication. The lives of Hope and her daughter are shaped by health problems, negative attitudes towards asylum seekers, and the grave insecurity of not having immigration status:

When I claimed asylum in this country, you know, when you are an asylum seeker, you are nothing, you don't make decisions of anything....here there is this idea that 'asylum seekers are dirty'. I been to a place where people won't even make coffee, projects who are given money for them. But they do not use this money in the right way. It would be simple, buying of coffee cups so asylum seekers can drink from a clean cup or a clean spoon. But asylum seekers are mistreated, they can't work, they have no money (Ref 11).

And, as in Natalya's situation, the negative attitudes towards asylum that prevail amongst the British population, are demonstrated in the way her landlord treats the property Hope lives in:

I am an asylum seeker, landlord knows I am an asylum seeker, he will not clean the drain, when they don't run properly. He will not care for the flat (Ref 11).

Hope's story is permeated by a sense of desperation. Because of her illness, she always needs to think about her health, the fact she might become more ill, and what would happen to her daughter in that case. In addition, she is always scared of deportation:

People don't care, they don't consider asylum seekers to be human. Now, I have no status, no documentation, benefits from NASS, and sometimes, I think about deportation, my friend, she was deported. There are some good people, but it gives me a lot of stress (Ref 11).

Creating a Lifeline

The lives of Hope and her daughter are marked by a lack of immigration status, permanent HIV treatment, and the knowledge that Hope's health situation can worsen at any time. As a strategy to help her manage the fears and anxieties she faces every day, Hope set up a voluntary project:

Last year I set up a project 'Order of Twelve', for me and my daughter. We were so stressed, because we cannot do normal things. I dream about doing normal things, like going to France on Eurostar, and see the Champs Elysees. We cannot, we are just stressed....then I set up this Project, we raised a lot of money for this. It is a young people's project, for young people affected by HIV. We meet every Saturday, and they do art work, they sing, last year they did a recording (Ref 11).

Although initially Hope set up this project to occupy herself, she also meant to create a support strategy, a kind of a 'lifeline' for her daughter in case she dies:

I wanted to do the Project as strength for my daughter, I want something, that when I die my daughter can move on. There are 15 children registered in the Project (Ref 11).

As the Project became more established, she realised that the work she does has further implications:

Some parents have HIV, but they will not bring their children, they are too afraid of the stigma. Adults are very ignorant, but we want children to be free around HIV, children when to come to have a happy time, we can go to McDonalds, or to go to see a film (Ref 11).

Although the project was set up as an individual coping strategy, a place where people can share their individual experiences of living with HIV/Aids, Hope realises there is a strong social and political element to the work they do. The project, although it is meant to alleviate the lives of children living with HIV, now also has the role of raising awareness in the families affected, and in the wider community. In Hope's story, the sharing of personal experiences has quite a direct social and political impact. In addition, at the time of interview, there was quite a lot of interest in her work, and she told me my interview was the third one in two weeks. Hope was very glad to be sharing her experiences, and was hoping to generate support through telling her story.

Mo: Caring for his Family

Mo came to Britain when he was about fifteen years old, and although he is of Somali background, he had been surviving throughout his childhood on the streets in Zambia, caring for his mum, and his brother and sister. His father was in Britain in order to claim asylum for himself and his family. Mo did not particularly want to come to Britain:

I didn't want to come here and be a refugee and an asylum seeker, I didn't want to be here, to learn a new language, start all over again. But my mum and dad knew how tough it would be (Ref 14).

Mo faced quite a complex set of barriers in settling into a new way of life, which was shaped by an interesting combination of factors such as cultural differences, illiteracy, and being a young carer. Mo had not experienced any formal education before he came to Britain:

I never had an education, there was always something in the way. I never went to school. I could never read or write, but here they put me in year 10. I could already speak English when we came here, I learned it from the cartoons in the cafes with TV (Ref 14).

Because he and his family had been surviving in extreme poverty on the streets of an African city, he found the attitudes to material wealth amongst his peers at school very strange, and he emphasized the way in which he found the differences between him and the other children at school very difficult to cope with:

Here, life was very strange for me, I came from a very different environment. I had a shock to see kids wear expensive shoes, Nikes and such, that would cost so much money. I just bought cheap trainers and was often victimised. Here there is a lot of peer pressure in the schools, being cool is very important, in Zambia those kinds of things just didn't exist, you know. Here you don't get the same kind of poverty, you see, I never waste food (Ref 14).

Mo found the school environment very difficult to cope with. He was bullied, not only because of the cultural differences, he also often felt like '*an adult stuck with children*'. Mo was used to having an adult role, because in Zambia he had been the main carer in the family from a very young age, since his mother always had quite serious mental health problems.

By the time Mo and his family came to live here, his father had remarried and had established a new family. However, he managed to claim asylum for Mo's mum and

brother and sister, on the basis of him as a working person, which meant that initially they were not entitled to any financial support. Mo describes how the first years were very difficult:

... my dad was not supporting us, there were no benefits, the first years were very disorganised (Ref 14).

The situation deteriorated when his mum had an accident, and had to be in hospital for a few months. Mo took care of his brother and sister and continued in his role of carer, as he had always done:

After my mum's accident I never cried until it was assembly time in school. The teacher asked, how are you? I just cried, it all came out. Then, I used to leave school early to go home, cook for my brother and sister, then go to the hospital to see my mum. She was in hospital for 3 months (Ref 14).

However, the strain of life in Britain began to show. The combination of the trouble in school, both with his peers and the pressures of not being able to read or write, the constant worries about the lack of benefits and a response to their asylum claim, and the anxiety caused by his mother's health situation got the better of him. He decided to leave school, to take a year out in order to become accustomed to his new environment, to learn about the new culture, and to spend time looking after his mum.

It was only after they had been here for two years that they finally received some help, in the form of a youth worker at a young carers' project: 'After two years, this lady from youth project would come to fill out forms' (Ref 14).

Very slowly his family life became a little bit more organised, Mo started volunteering at the young carers' project, and he learnt to identify himself quite closely as a young carer, which helped him to make sense of himself a bit more:

....I am a young carer, I am always in-between being adult, and young. Young carers are very different, and seen as very different. Often they are very experienced, outspoken, intelligent, but often have less schooling, and other things go on for them (Ref 14).

Once he learnt to make sense of himself as a young carer, he began to understand his life more, and started to feel a little bit more settled. Now he also felt confident enough to continue his education at a local adult college. He preferred to take a 'normal' English qualification, rather than the ESOL classes. In ESOL the focus is on speaking, and Mo wanted to learn to read and write. Because he had never been to school during his childhood, he was illiterate. He managed to get by in school by using the teachers' lecture notes. He took Maths, Science, and in the end left college with an NVQ2 in Engineering. He proudly told me he won the 'Do the Right Thing Award' for good citizenship⁵⁵, but realises that he still has difficulty with reading and writing:

I was nominated for a "Do the Right Thing Award"! From 1999 I studied electronics in Greenwich, which finished in 2002. I got an NVQ2 and a City and Guilds certificate. Now, when people meet me in the street or at work, they see me as an all-rounder, a person who is good at everything, but things that others take for granted I can't do, you know, read and write (Ref 14).

During this time he was still volunteering at the young carers' project, supporting other young carers who had similar experiences as he had. He also became very interested in sport, and starting volunteering in a local leisure centre. In this way, he came to be

⁵⁵ Discussion of Mo's life, his role as carer for his family, and his work with young people in the community in 'Mo of the same' *The Greater Woolwich People* Spring 2005

involved in youth work for the local council. Mo now works in different jobs, some paid, some voluntarily, but all targeted towards integrating young people from extremely disadvantaged communities into society. For example, he has received extensive training at a local Premiership football club, to become a football coach. He has taken these skills back into the community, where he coaches young people in football, and engages them in a whole range of different activities.

In this way Mo shares his personal experiences of being a refugee, a young carer, someone who survived the trials and tribulations of settling in a new country, and mentors many young people in various community cohesion projects, he feels he understands them, and is very proud to be able to be supportive:

You see, a lot of refugees have mental breakdown, it is very isolating doing everything on your own. And there is a lot of pressure to 'better' yourself, but you also have your older experiences (Ref 14).

Mo has an in-depth understanding of what young migrants go through. He did not set up any project, but he is well known in his local area, and very well respected. He makes his personal experiences socially meaningful through the work he does within community youth projects, and again, this may not instigate significant social change, but his work has a significant social role for the young people he works with, and for the wider local community. Furthermore, with the recent focus on youth violence, community cohesion strategies such as those that Mo is involved with, are both socially and politically relevant.

Conclusion

The main characters in the narratives discussed in this chapter all faced a complex set of barriers to making some kind of life for themselves and for their families. They managed to adopt quite imaginative strategies in overcoming these hindrances, and eventually found their feet. Although for most it came at tremendous cost, the stories demonstrate that once people begin to share their experiences, and find support, they manage to overcome barriers to settlement, they find information, learn to access services, and begin to find numerous and imaginative strategies in making new lives. Furthermore, their stories raised awareness, and facilitated personal and political empowerment.

Amira learnt about British youth culture, and made friends with families from different ethnic backgrounds in order to enable the settlement of her children. Based on her experiences, she now supports people with advice on immigration, domestic violence and other women's issues. Natalya eventually found help in solving her housing issues, and set up a large support network to share her experiences, so that others would not have to suffer similar problems. Anna suffered a severe crisis of confidence for many years, mainly as a result of how she was treated by various voluntary projects and public services. She regained some control over her life only gradually, after sharing her experiences firstly at her part time job, and later with Natalya. Hope's story of living with HIV/Aids is desperate, yet she has, to some extent, managed to build a life for herself and her daughter. Mo struggled initially, mainly through structural and cultural barriers, but since learning to make sense of his life and his experiences through identifying himself as a 'young carer', he has managed to make a life for himself and his brother and sister, whilst still caring for his mum, and also for his father's second family.

The findings demonstrate clearly that asylum seekers do not necessarily have communities or other social networks to tap into for support, most can only rely on themselves, and the narratives tell us how refugees needed to adopt *individual* strategies to overcome barriers, and find their way into society as individuals. Most of participants discussed here set up networks for themselves and the stories told in this study tell narratives of social and political mobilisation on a small scale, around issues that are controversial, such as HIV, gender, diversity and community cohesion, or around issues where a lack of information has been experienced, such as language, cultural differences, advice on accessing services, health or community advocacy. Notably, the sharing of experiences amongst refugees and asylum seekers is not necessarily along the lines of a specific community, or being a refugee or an asylum seeker.

When refugees became personally empowered through sharing their personal stories, it had a significant political and social impact on the social worlds they live in, albeit on a small scale. Amira's activities have an impact on her family, the people that she meets, supports and socialises with, the Women's Group that facilitates the contact, and the wider community in her local area. The work of Natalya and Anna reaches many people, and is specifically targeted at empowering migrants through sharing their personal experiences. Their focus is on the needs of migrants in terms of accessing services, and they have become educated and skilled in passing on their knowledge, so that others do not have to suffer as they did. This may not be challenging the political status quo with regards to asylum seekers, but it does empower those people that come to them for advice and assistance.

Hope's work raises awareness of HIV/Aids amongst young people and the wider community in her local area, and the sharing of her personal experiences has a direct social and political impact. Mo did not set up any project, but makes his personal experiences socially meaningful through the work he does within community youth projects, and again, this may not instigate major social change, but his work has a significant role for the young people he works with, and for the wider local community, especially in relation to the recent focus on youth violence.

These stories show that many refugees manage to be 'agents' despite being hindered by structural processes, other barriers to integration, lack of support, and lack of an audience willing to listen to them. Within a network of power relations, people did gain some voice, and learned to make sense of their new lives. Their stories reach an audience, and they formed networks. However, for the moment, their voices operate on a small scale, and are not yet powerful enough to open up a 'narrative framework', or challenge the still present dominant narratives or political discourses. I believe that many of the participants in this study had some freedom in shaping their own lives, in spite of the many structural, social and political barriers they faced. For many though, the finding of some support, of someone willing to listen, took so much time that making a new life came at tremendous cost.

Chapter Eight

CONCLUSION: REFUGEE STORIES, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF SHARING EXPERIENCES

In the spring of 2007 I received a call from Zarah who informed me that she and her family had finally been granted ILR. After seven years of anxiety this was such incredible news that both of us cried and laughed at the same time. I was and still am so happy for her. During this conversation Zarah also told me (almost triumphantly) that they now had to move into private accommodation, would not receive support from NASS anymore, and that she would be very proud to be paying her own rent in the future. In addition to this news she let me know me that after years of exams and struggle to have her qualifications from Iraq recognised in the UK, she had been promoted at work and achieved a professional level similar to her position in Baghdad. More recently Zarah has applied for and been given British citizenship, and she proudly wrote to me in December 2008 that her daughter will be able to go on a school trip to Italy next spring, and that they are planning a holiday abroad. These snippets of news of Zarah's life are happy, and give the impression that she and her family have successfully passed through and 'achieved' the final stages 'resettlement' and 'post-resettlement' respectively, of Baker's (1990: 67) eight-phase model of involuntary migration (in Hynes, 2003).

However, thinking of Zarah's life in terms of different phases conceals the fact that although she managed to learn English to a very high standard, studied for many different exams, and achieved promotion at work, she also continues to suffer migraines and

depression as a remnant of her experiences, and still worries about her family in Iraq. It also glosses over the many court cases they fought (and lost), and over the amount of times Zarah had to tell her story of having been raped and abused, often to unsympathetic audiences. Furthermore, her husband, although having had a good engineering job in Iraq, has not managed to find professional employment in Britain, he works part time in a local supermarket. He also suffers depression, and still takes medication. I am very happy Zarah managed to make a new life, but because I have listened to her, and on occasion still do, I also know that the sense of loss in their lives will be with them forever.

Zarah managed to overcome her trauma to a certain extent, because she started to share her experiences. First to a counsellor, who indicated to her that in Britain there is support for women who have been raped, and also that she would help. For Zarah the notion of support was quite a revelation: 'for me, this it was like light' (Ref 1). Initially it was difficult for Zarah to narrate her experiences to the self and to others. She avoided the process of 'narrative knowing', because 'owning' her experiences caused her too much distress. Zarah could not weave her experiences of rape and abuse into of her life story, because she knew as a Muslim woman there would be no support from her community, only exclusion. Subsequently she spent the first few years in a state of mental shock: 'if you meet me then you would know I was nuts' (Ref 1). However, by sharing her experiences with her counsellor, she learned that she found consolation and reassurance in telling her story, and she carried on talking, to her GP, her psychiatrist, and several lawyers.

Once she started to talk and realised there are different systems of meaning attached to the notion of rape in Britain, she could begin to acknowledge what had happened to her. She realised the importance of telling her story in re-building her life. It was Zarah who contacted me, she was adamant that she wanted to tell me her story, I almost felt that she chose me to talk to. The finding of support through the sharing of experiences is paramount for people who have suffered, since it helps them to make sense of what has happened to them, helps to give meaning to their lives and circumstances.

This is also evident in the work of Eastmond (1996; 2007: 252), who carried out a number of studies with exiles from El Salvador in Sweden, as well as with other Latin American refugees in different settings. Eastmond argues that the extent to which experiences are shared influences how people give meaning to those experiences. She describes how El Salvadorean women, whilst still living in their community in El Salvador, made their experiences of poverty and violence meaningful by sharing these experiences as part of daily life. In this way, the notion of suffering became part of the wider narrative framework of meaning and moral values within the local community, through which each individual could make sense of their own experiences of poverty and violence. In contrast, Eastmond found that amongst the El Salvadorean women who lived in exile, the focus of daily life had transferred from sharing experiences to coping with unemployment, isolation and exclusion in a new society. They found little sympathy from the host society, and since the experiences of suffering were no longer shared, they lost their system of meaning through which to make sense of their experiences, which resulted in problems of health and depression:

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; 2007: 252).

The previous chapter emphasized how refugees managed to overcome barriers to settlement, and achieved a sense of empowerment, even managing to support many others in a similar situation. However, I do not want to avoid the issue that the accomplishment of making a new life for most participants came closely intertwined with trauma and loss, which was evident in many of their stories. Almost every participant I interviewed would tell me of a family member who did not manage so well. I heard many stories of people who suffered depression or more severe mental health problems, as well as health problems as a result of what happened to them before, during, or after fleeing persecution.

The narratives at the heart of this study describe lives which are characterised by hardship, ill health, rejection, violence, and other situations of quite extreme suffering. Many of the story tellers managed to turn their lives around, regain some control over their destinies despite their experiences. However, some of the participants indicated that although they survived the difficulties they had experienced, they never managed to move beyond survival to actively making a new life.

For example Alan, who is a well educated mathematician from Eritrea, and has quite an impressive employment record from Saudi Arabia, has always worked in very low paid jobs in the UK, and finds it very difficult to change that. Listening to Alan brought some complex issues to the fore, since he was almost phobic about conspiracy. He displayed an

immense distrust not only of governments, but also of organisations that were there to help him:

For validating my mathematical knowledge, I am a mathematician, you know, I went to RAGU⁵⁶, then with my experience, they put me to work in a supermarket. Now it is difficult for people to work hard with little gain.....[T]his policy is not for refugees but for RAGU, they just provide cheap labour (Ref 15).

Where some of the other participants (such as Zarah or Anna for example) kept trying to find help to overcome such barriers to accessing services, Alan has become more mistrusting of any authority, and is very disappointed and angry. He has been working in low paid employment for a number of years, where the working in shifts and the weather conditions are quite detrimental to his health. He is not so young anymore, and suffers quite severe heart problems. His wife also suffers with her health, and is in and out of hospital. Alan's story seems to lack any capacity for change, and gives a strong indication that he has given up.

Another example is to be found in Omar's story, who we already met in chapter five. He travelled through a number of countries for many years, trying to find a way to claim asylum and bring his family, who were living on the streets of Zambia, to safety. He is quite aware of the lack of capacity for change in his life:

My life now, it is not good, but not bad. I worked in factory for seven years, but lost my job, I was sacked because of medical problems, I was six months off work. Now I have incapacity benefit (Ref 18).

⁵⁶ RAGU (Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit) is an organisation specifically set up to help refugees to have their higher education qualification and professional employment history recognised in Britain. For more information please visit <http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/ragu/about-us.cfm>

Apart from health problems Omar suffers quite severe depression and memory loss. He feels he lost his life fleeing the violent situation in Somalia, and realises the things he has missed out on. His hope is for his children to have a better life:

My children are studying, my hope is for my children. I lost education, job, but now I can help my children (Ref 18).

Even though many of the refugees I met achieved in finding a place of safety for themselves and their families, some did not manage to 're-make' or 're-build' their lives beyond that. Their energy, or capacity for agency, has been worn down, and they can not tell themselves new stories of the self anymore. Often, as in the case of Alan and Omar, this is accompanied by health problems, and/or mental health problems. To sum up, where some of the participants learned to tell themselves new stories of the self, and achieved some degree of self-determination, this often came accompanied by a sense of loss, and in some cases at great cost. For others, the experiences as a refugee have been so detrimental that they do not manage to find new ways of autonomy, or of making sense of what has happened to them. This brings the discussion to one of main questions of this thesis: within a network of power relations, to what extent do refugees feel they have the capacity for agency in constructing their lives?

Refugee Narratives: Capacity for Agency?

The lives of Omar and Alan, as well the stories of the lives of all the refugees I listened to were initially complicated by insecure and unpredictable situations in their homelands. In a world of globalizing developments, the lives of many people have become insecure and unpredictable, since globalisation is a process in which individuals do not have the opportunity to participate on a basis of equality in terms of economy, politics and culture.

Instead, it is a 'system of selective inclusion and exclusion of specific areas and groups, which maintains and exacerbates inequality' (Castles, 2003), and which has overwhelmed populations around the globe with political, social, and economic insecurity. In all corners of the world this has led to a 'turbulence of migration' (Papastergiadis, 2000), and many refugee producing conflicts and human rights abuse (UNHCR, 2008).

Where the global insecurity and unpredictability of the postmodern world penetrates deeply into social worlds and individual lives, people need to make sense of their individual life experiences through a continuous cycle of telling and listening to stories in an attempt to keep up with the turbulent globalising forces that continue to shape their lives (Denzin, 2001: 154-155). Some theorists, such as Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) would argue that this has given rise to more scope for individuals to tell their stories and to construct their own lives. The postmodern emphasis on 'change, diversity, and uncertainty' has paved the way for a variety of 'possibilities for new accounts of the individual', and the 'narrative turn' has made it possible for personal stories to be told and listened to. However, these same unstable postmodern conditions also make the building of new lives and the shaping of new identities a very difficult task (Roberts, 2002: 5; see also Bauman, 2000).

In political discourses, the emphasis on external forces such as 'forced' migration and 'processes of statecraft' (Soguk, 1999) in shaping refugee lives disregards the idea that refugees may have had some 'choice' in the course of events, may have made some decisions in the process of becoming a refugee. Overlooking the refugees' ability to make choices and decisions, however limited, carries the assumption that refugees cannot

possibly be agents (Turton, 2003: 7). In this context, refugees come to be seen as ‘passive victims’, as people who depend on governments and ngo’s, and who are a burden on the international community as well as on their country of asylum (ibid; Ghorashi, 2005: 185). Furthermore, thinking of refugees in this way, emphasises the common needs and common experiences of refugees, and disregards the abilities and resourcefulness of refugees in remaking their own lives (Soguk, 1999: 4-5).

Where recently the focus in refugee research has shifted to the structural aspects of ‘forced migration’, the notion of the refugee as an individual has gradually become less significant. This is dangerous, since the emphasis on *structure* relates quite closely to policy agendas of Western governments who increasingly sacrifice the independence of refugees in order to control migratory movement (Hathaway, 2007: 2). Losing sight of the refugee as an individual means acknowledging that the term ‘*refugee* signals a burden, a victim and a threat’ rather than a person ‘with skills, capacities, and histories that contributed to their host societies’ (Harrell-Bond and Voutira, 2007: 13). Refugees are not necessarily helpless victims, more likely they are people with agency and voice (Eastmond, 2007: 253).

This study has taken the voices of refugees as its starting point. Whilst it has advocated that people actively shape their lives as well as the world around them as they tell stories of it, this thesis also acknowledges that there are real structural processes that determine individual lives, and dictate how they should be lived (Fay, 1996). In terms of narrative theory this means that both lived stories and told stories are informed by events and incidents, as well as by accounts and representations (Bruner, 1984: 6-7). Portelli (1998:

26; see also Powles, 2004), suggests that a socially embedded narrative passes through a 'shifting scale' between lived stories and told stories, indicating that telling the story of one's life is about 'real' events as well as about constructing the self.

As a narrative research project, this study has explored 'the textured and contradictory space between *structure* and *agency*' (Alexander, 2004: original emphasis), and has tried to explore to what extent a refugee life is 'told' by already existing powerful social narratives, underlying structural processes, or dominant discourses, or the extent to which people, in this case refugees, make decisions about the events they encounter in their lives, tell stories of their experiences, and in this way are 'agents' in shaping their own lives. The main focus therefore has been to learn how personal refugee stories find receptive audiences as they tread wearily into a network of power relations in which particular voices dominate the political agenda, and determine how refugee stories ought to be told.

Being Forced to Flee: Making Decisions in Conflict Situations

In chapter five I argued that forces such as political conflict, violence and persecution compel people to flee. However, within that process, refugees also rationalise their experiences, develop a profound narrative understanding of their situation, and actively make the decision to flee. Participants would firstly tell me of the socio-political situation in their home country, then focussing the narrative to explain how this situation affected their community, their family or employment. The story would end with a personal, individual dimension such as how the wider situation had affected their lives. Once

participants had moved the story to the self within this wider context, their narratives offered an insight into how they made the decision to flee.

Ruben told me how for a while he did not know what to do or where to go, but when he decided to leave, he found neighbours willing to help him to plan his departure. Abbas and Hameed both described how their lives became endangered and that they had to leave to find a place of safety. However, Abbas felt he had options, he could have stayed in Iraq to spy for the Secret Police. For Abbas this was not an acceptable option, and he chose to leave. Miranda left Kosovo with her husband because their situation had become very dangerous. However, before they embarked on their journey, there was a process of negotiation with her family, the organization of financial resources, and the planning of flight. The journeys into the unknown that refugees make are characterised by both courage and resilience, as in the case of Shabibi, and by sheer desperation, as revealed by Abbas, Philippe and Amira. When refugees have no knowledge of their destination, and when their lives are in the hands of agents, it can cause them to feel a great sense dependency and loss of control, to the point that they 'feel like a baby', or that they are 'kaput'. Many who arrive in Britain have to claim asylum in this state of barely knowing what is happening to them.

I explored which events forced refugees to make the decision to leave, and examined the extent to which they themselves were rational actors in making these decisions. Most participants rationalised their individual situation within a wider political/historical context, thereby acknowledging that they were 'forced' to make the decision to flee. However, I believe that although the participants were 'forced' to make the decision to

flee, they were ‘agents’ in that they negotiated flight as a course of action with the self, their families and/or communities, and (either with or without help) organised their departure and journey. In addition, being confronted with the difficulties encountered during the journey, the active engagement in coping with events does not end once people have left their countries. Both Omar and Philippe for example had to change strategy a number of times. Finally, upon arrival in Britain, people need to become actively involved in claiming asylum, finding housing, learning English, and accessing services. As I have argued in previous chapters, failing to do so has many detrimental consequences.

Learning to Tell ‘Credible’ Stories

From the early twentieth century the development of asylum and immigration legislation in Britain has clearly exposed the notion of asylum as a ‘process of statecraft’ (Soguk, 1999: 9), rather than as an instrument to finding a place of sanctuary for those in need. Especially since the 1990s, a severely restrictive asylum paradigm has been established, designed to restrict refugees from entering and settling in Britain. Since asylum claims are assessed on the basis of the individual circumstances of each case, it is during the asylum determination procedure that the telling of, and listening to the life story of the refugee is the main method by which the status of each individual asylum claim is determined (Amnesty International 2004; Jones, 2007).

During the asylum procedure the asylum seeker needs to share their subjective life experiences in a way that conforms to the mould of eligibility for Refugee Status under the 1951 Convention, as interpreted through the structural requirements of British asylum

policy. It has become extremely difficult for any asylum claim to be recognized as meeting the criteria of the Refugee Convention and the requirements of British policy. Within these extremely rigid structural settings, the lives of refugees depend on how they manage to communicate their experiences into credible stories. The penalty for not telling a ‘credible’ story carries the risk of either ending up in dire conditions in Britain, such as being detained or living on the streets, or being returned to a politically unstable situation characterized by conflict and violence. It has therefore been of vital interest to investigate how refugee stories as the basis for asylum claims are told and interpreted within the asylum determination procedure.

Research findings suggest that refugee stories in the asylum determination procedure are subjected to a rigid regime of power relations which demands that they conform to very narrow criteria. Where there are discrepancies between claims for asylum and the requirements of the 1951 Refugee Convention, as interpreted through British asylum policy, this is not necessarily because asylum seekers are not telling ‘true’ or ‘accurate’ stories, nor is it because their claims are not based on a ‘well-founded fear of persecution’. As this study has demonstrated, refugee stories and the rigid criteria for ‘credible’ stories of the Home Office mismatch for a variety of reasons.

For example, Moayad’s claim received a ‘first refusal’. His state of depression and lack of understanding of what was expected of him due to cultural differences came upon the ‘culture of disbelief’ (Jubany-Baucells, 2003) that prevails amongst case workers at the Home Office. Consequently his case became infused with a lack of credibility, was not given the consideration it required, and his claim was refused. He failed, not because his

claim was unfounded, but because he did not convince his case worker that he had a ‘well founded fear of persecution’. Caseworkers in the Home Office are known to apply a narrow cultural perspective during interviewing asylum claimants, as well as working within a trend of disbelieving asylum claimants’ stories, thereby making decisions about a ‘lack of credibility’ on the basis of little or no evidence (UNHCR, 2005: 9-12).

Moayad received a first refusal, because during his asylum interview he did not give information about his case if he was not asked. He did not of his own accord contribute details of his circumstances. As a member of the PKK, Moayad had from a very young age learned to do as he was told: ‘I always try to make Party happy, I am member, if Party say do this, I go there, and do it. Because I am a member of Party, therefore if Party wants me to going there, I was going’ (Ref 2). In addition, from a cultural perspective, he was not used to contributing to a conversation unless he was asked. As a person who was used to doing as he was told, Moayad was not an ‘active participant’ during the asylum interview, and he did not manage to convince his case worker that he had a ‘well founded fear of persecution’. However, through sharing his experiences with other members of his community, he learned to be more pro-active in telling his story and presenting his case. Once he understood that he needed to provide more detailed answers, and what was expected of him, he became more forthcoming in telling his story, and learned to ‘refine [his] story in a way to fit into the needs or the requirements of the Home Office, or the Immigration Officer’ (RW1).

Zarah’s claim was refused on the basis of gender, and loss of credibility. As her case was turned down for an extension of Exceptional Leave to Remain, and moved into a

different phase of appeal, Zarah actually became stronger: ‘...now I am different person from before...I was telling myself I had to depend on myself, to be stronger’ (Ref 1). By this time she had nearly finished her counselling sessions, and learned the value of support: ‘I start to know people around me, organisations, services, whoever would be able to support me, so it’s ok. I want to speak with myself, analysing, talking everything’ (Ref 1). Zarah also began to understand how to use this support to enhance her capacity for agency: ‘[T]his is my battle in life just by myself...this is a battle between me and the Home Office, I want to get my rights’ (Ref 1). In order to learn about the policies and procedures, she started a course: ‘I start to do a course for Interpreting and Community Advocacy, to have more information about all of these things’ (Ref 1).

Furthermore, Zarah also realised that as she became more capable of confronting her own situation, she may be able to support others to do so:

And socialising, I wasn’t sociable person, but now I start to socialise, especially with my Community Advocacy Course. The people I met, some from other communities, even English people, they really encourage me to be strong. And now encourage me to be helpful to other people as well. They plant this idea in me, it is very important (Ref 1).

Zarah understood very well the importance of support in her struggle with the Home Office, and how it is equally important to assist others in similar situations.

In a similar way to Moayad and Zarah, Bob’s claim was refused, mainly because Bob was unaware of what the basic asylum procedure required. His claim was turned down on the basis of non-compliance, because Bob was not informed that the Home Office needed more information. When I met him he said ‘[Now] I would be more proactive’ (Ref 21),

which demonstrates that he realises that the asylum process actually required a substantive degree of agency. I have met Bob a few times since the interview, to reflect on how his story was interpreted within the context of the study.

Bob had very little scope for pro-activity in his case, and he felt there was very little support for him: 'In the 1990s there were very few organisations to help asylum seekers' (Ref 21). He felt very isolated, and always felt he was seen as 'bogus', which meant he 'couldn't find a way to join society...there was no direct pathway into settlement (ibid). Bob has been very disillusioned by the immigration procedure, he feels he lost years of his life: 'I may have married and had children if I had not been caught up in the asylum system' (ibid). He did not realise when he handed over his passport to the Home Office what the implications for the future would be. Bob applied for citizenship in January 2007, and is still waiting for a response. In his own words: 'the system is still dragging' (ibid).

Often, when refugees claim asylum initially, they do not know how to tell their story, or how to present their case, and claimants find themselves discussing their personal experiences in a culture of disbelief from the onset. In relation to asylum claims, gender remains a contested issue, since the definition of a refugee under the 1951 Convention does not explicitly recognize women as a group that endures political persecution. Furthermore, it remains for refugee stories to be deemed 'credible' within the climate of hostility in which claimants have to defend their case.

The claims of all three these participants were initially refused. They were forced to become more pro-active in handling their claim, and taking more control of their 'case'. I

do not believe that this increased pro-activity can be understood as *agency* in the sense that they became more empowered to tell their stories freely. Rather, they were coerced to learn to present their 'lives' in a way that conformed to the criteria set by the citizen/nation/state hierarchy (Soguk, 1999), they lost their individuality and became a 'case', in need of being categorized. The stories of their experiences became objectified during the asylum procedure, which 'manifests the subjection of those who are perceived as objects and the objectification of those who are subjected' (Foucault, 1984: 197), and from a Foucauldian perspective, it is in this way that individual lives are constructed through political, scientific and social discourses, which are as dominant in determining people's life styles as the collective identities of the modern era (Foucault, 2003; 1980; Rabinow, 1984; Smart, 2002). Where the subjective experiences of the individual refugee encountered the objectifying requirements of asylum policy as a structural process, refugees lost any control over how they could tell their stories, and although the process required them to be pro-active, they also sensed a loss of agency whilst their claim was being decided.

Overcoming Barriers to Integration

Although most of the refugees I interviewed described how they managed to settle and integrate, and in some ways were quite grateful to British society, many participants indicated some harsh barriers to settlement. Findings suggest that issues such as barriers to accessing services for housing, health, English language classes, or general family support, complicated their lives quite ruthlessly, and many of the people I met faced quite extreme circumstances and difficulties in their first few years in Britain.

When Natalya's husband was not given accommodation from NASS, she and her family spent the first year and a half in a very squalid and harmful privately rented housing situation. She was unable to find any support for her and her two toddler children. The council would not help them unless they became homeless. Although their problems related quite clearly to structural barriers in accessing NASS, the lack of interest by the council and the lack of information for refugees and asylum seekers also related to the negative discourses that were prevalent at the time. Natalya feels that as asylum seekers, no one was interested in helping them, and she identifies attitudes towards asylum seekers as one of the main obstacles:

the doctor, the health visitor, they helped, but not enough. No one ever told us any information about where to find help, where to find refugee projects you know that can help you, that help asylum seekers. I think it is because they are fed up with asylum seekers, maybe sometimes even abuse them (Ref 17).

Anna experienced barriers to accessing language training and services to assist with employment. When Anna felt very unwell during pregnancy, she did not have the language skills or the confidence to stand up to the consultant who told her she was fine, and who refused to examine her appropriately. This resulted in the loss of her baby. The cost of barriers to accessing services for Anna was immense.

Natalya described the plight of the asylum seeker as 'being blind, like to have problems in all areas of life' (Ref 17), but through sharing her experiences, and in overcoming her own problems in settlement, she learned how to help others. Because of their own struggle, Natalya and Anna have understood quite well what new communities need in terms of services, and they have become educated and skilled in passing on this knowledge, so that others do not have to have their experiences.

Amira, although she had more assistance with 'structural' matters, such as claiming asylum at the Home Office, housing, and filling out forms for other services, noted how there was very little support for settling her children into a new culture and a new school, attended by diverse communities. In helping her children to settle, Amira actively engaged with youth culture, reached out across communities, and attended many courses geared towards language and community advocacy skills. Through making friendships with people from different backgrounds, and using her skills and experiences to support refugee women with advice on immigration, domestic violence and other women's issues, Amira has developed social networks through which she has found support, and now supports others who have a range of different experiences.

For Hope the problems are quite different. As a sufferer of HIV/Aids, she receives adequate health treatment. However, Hope's claim has been refused because she travelled back to Zambia to collect her daughter: 'I bent the rules of asylum...[T]he laws does not recognise the problems of a person' (Ref 11). In addition, as in Natalya's situation, Hope feels that the negative attitudes towards asylum that prevail amongst the British population, quite strongly shape her life: 'when you are an asylum seeker, you are nothing, you don't make decisions of anything....here there is this idea that *asylum seekers are dirty*' (Ref 11), and Hope believes her landlord does not care for her flat because she is an asylum seeker.

Hope, in spite of not having a secure immigration status, and whilst suffering the harsh symptoms of HIV/Aids, managed to set up a voluntary project. As an individual coping strategy she raised money to provide support for children who live with HIV/Aids. She

realises there is a strong social and political element to the work she does, since the project also has the role of raising awareness in the families affected, and in the wider community. In Hope's story, the sharing of personal experiences has quite a direct social and political impact, of which she was acutely aware. Hope was very glad to be sharing her experiences, hoping to generate support through telling her story, not only for herself, but also for her daughter, and the other children in the project.

Mo faced quite a complex set of barriers in settling into a new way of life, relating to issues such as cultural differences, illiteracy in the British education system, and being a young carer. Mo had not experienced any formal education before he came to Britain, and found youth culture as a teenager from the streets of Zambia very difficult to deal with: '[H]ere, life was very strange for me, I came from a very different environment...there is a lot of peer pressure in the schools, being cool is very important, in Zambia those kinds of things just didn't exist, you know. Here you don't get the same kind of poverty, you see, I never waste food' (Ref 14). Mo uses his personal experiences of being a young carer and a refugee, and mentors many young people in various community cohesion projects. He makes his personal experiences socially meaningful through the work he does within community youth projects, and he has a significant social role for the young people he works with, and for the wider local community.

Each of these individual narratives by themselves may not instigate the significant social change on a global level as suggested by Giddens (1991) or Plummer (1995). However, the findings of this study demonstrate that when people persist in telling their stories, they find imaginative ways of overcoming barriers to settlement, build new lives, and

find different ‘forms of solidarity’ (Rustin and Chamberlayne, 2000: 7-8). As Eastmond (2007) points out, it is difficult for refugees to find solidarity *as refugees*. However, the participants in this study have organized locally, on a small scale, and found support and solidarity in relation to many different issues, such as gender, asylum, HIV/Aids, being a young carer, community cohesion, language, family support. In this way they socialise, make their mark, raise awareness, and support others. It is a way, albeit small, in which their stories are shared, which has the potential to open up further spaces in society for such stories to be told. In Britain there definitely is a lack of a ‘narrative framework’ (Kushner, 2006) in which refugee experiences can be shared, however, small spaces are being created by refugees themselves at local level, around a range of issues, which may lead to a larger framework in the future.

In summary, in each of the different parts of refugee lives as analysed in this thesis: situation in the home country; sharing personal experiences as part of the claim for asylum; and overcoming barriers in settlement, refugees experience the extreme consequences of structural constraints on their lives. However, in many situations, as participants discussed on many occasions, they have had to be agents, capable of making decisions, learning to tell their stories within a particular framework, and finding support in settlement. The main focus of this study has been to figure out to which extent a refugee life is ‘told’ by already existing powerful social narratives, underlying structural processes, or dominant discourses; and to ascertain the extent to which people, in this case refugees, make decisions about the events they encounter in their lives, tell stories of their experiences, and in this way are ‘agents’ in shaping their own lives.

In this context, I would not conceptualise agency in the same way that Giddens (1991) explains individualisation, which he sees as enabling more scope for reflexivity, and more opportunities for emancipation. Instead, I conceive of the agency of refugees as devising strategies to cope with events, and as imagining ways forward from a situation of insecurity and uncertainty. Williams (2006: 867) explains this form of agency as the ‘tactics used by this marginal group to make the best of their resources and capabilities’. She uses De Certeau’s notion of ‘the art of the weak’ (1984: 37; in Williams, 2006: 867) to emphasise the difference between the way individuals who are able to live in the dominant system live their lives, and the way that refugees manage to do so, despite structural constraints. She names this form of agency the ‘tactics’ used by refugees who act out of a ‘position of vulnerability’⁵⁷, a situation of powerlessness, and need find imaginative ways to tell their stories, and shape their lives.

Finding an Audience for Refugee Stories?

The question remains, if refugee stories are shared in smaller scale social networks, how can these individual experiences be solidified into ‘public interests that are larger than the sum of their individual ingredients’, and how can this individual empowerment be translated into a more collective notion of what a ‘just society’ is made of (Bauman, 2000: 51-52)? In a society where private issues are continuously on display, and where the notion of the individual self has been reified, and become a cultural commodity (Denzin: 1992: 8-9), how can individual stories instigate social and political change? Many different kinds of voices are vying for attention. Bauman explains this as the public

⁵⁷ ‘position of vulnerability’ – concepts as discussed with Dr. Milena Chimienti, (2009). For a detailed discussion of these issues please see Chimienti, M. (2009) *Prostitution et migration. La dynamique de l’agir faible* Zurich: Seismo

domain being invaded by the private, which means that it is increasingly difficult for individual voices to be heard. In this context, although personal refugee stories have the potential to serve as a vehicle to empowerment, and to gaining a political voice, they need to compete with all other voices, and it seems more and more complex to seek some form of emancipation or empowerment by making individual experiences public.

Therefore, we need to ask the question whether the publicizing of personal refugee experiences has the potential to end a 'culture of denial' amongst audiences. Even though the sharing of experiences by refugees has led to small social networks in local areas, would such stories be listened to and find support in wider society? Cohen (2000) argues that the hard work of international humanitarian agencies, alongside the widened network of global news reporting, brings a continuous flow of images of suffering. He believes that instead of generating 'compassion fatigue', people continue to support basic human rights values, even though this is not necessarily converted into political action (ibid: 290-291). However, whilst the personal tale is highly valued in contemporary society, because it keeps 'the myth of the autonomous, free individual alive' (Denzin, 1992: 8-9), it is also important to realise that the possibility of personal narratives as a vehicle to empowerment remains debatable.

Whilst the increase and recurrence of atrocity images and stories can result in 'overload and fatigue', they also need to compete more for 'the scarce resources of attention and compassion'. As part of a bizarre media culture, interspersed with daytime tv talk shows and reality television programmes, which exploit 'the art of confession and testimony' to the point of the ridiculous, we can continuously witness the individual suffering of

ordinary people. It is difficult for images of extreme poverty, of 'political massacres', or of refugee lives to compete for an audience on equal terms with such programmes, especially since the free market of late capitalism generates ever more marginalized groups to compete with (Cohen, 2000: 288-292).

Although images of suffering are more noticeable in a late modern society of hi-tech media communication, there is also less background information, which makes it more difficult to understand quite complex global political situations. This may result in the '*tyranny of the local*, alongside what we might call the specificity of the personal' (Harvey, 1989, in Goodson, 1995: 89-90; original emphasis) and we need to be mindful that a critical engagement with general patterns, and social and political backgrounds, might be lost and substituted with 'local stories and personal anecdotes' (Goodson, 1995: 89-90). In addition, whilst the revealing of 'truth', rather than remaining in 'denial', has the potential to achieve social justice (Cohen, 2000: 278), it remains important to situate the *narrative turn* 'within the emergent cultural patterns of contemporary societies and economies' (Goodson 1995: 89-90).

A final hindrance to the potential of refugee stories to find an audience is that when the personal experiences of refugees become public, they are often represented by others. The lives of refugees for example are often represented by voluntary sector and charitable organisations (O'Neill and Harindranath, 2006: 41), rather than by refugees and asylum seekers themselves. Although Goodson (1995: 89-90) welcomes efforts by such organisations to seek the empowerment of marginalised groups, he notes that the work of

‘state-sponsored “voices”’ is at times accompanied by ‘social control’, and such narratives contribute to the balance of power rather than challenging it.

Furthermore, rather than listening to first-hand accounts of the horrifying events that characterise a globalised world, citizens of Western states have felt the arrival of refugees and migrants as a threat to their social order, and continue to perceive refugees within a statist paradigm (Soguk, 1999: 178). Most people are unaware of the realities of refugee experiences from the perspective of the refugee, and of the personal stories of refugee lives, as told by refugees themselves. Instead, after the incessant vilification of asylum seekers in the media and by politicians, which reinforced existing prejudices, and generated incredibly high levels of hostility and intolerance (Greenslade, 2005), people in Britain do not adhere to a general perception of the concept of ‘asylum’ or ‘asylum seeker’, and do not necessarily relate them to people who flee persecution. Many members of the public believe that refugees and asylum seekers enjoy privileged treatment, are a threat to British culture, and in line with Kushner’s (2006: 198-199) notion of the ‘absence of a national narrative framework’, they cannot ‘relate the term asylum to their own lives’ (Independent Asylum Commission, 2008).

Structural processes have increasingly marginalised refugees to the point where they now live quite apart from mainstream society, separated from the host population in accommodation or detention centres, which makes social interaction virtually impossible, and makes it easier for their voices to be ignored (and maintain the absence of a national narrative framework). Debates will continue to focus on ‘reducing numbers and securing borders’, and remain narrow if the stories of asylum seekers and refugees are allowed to

remain marginalised. Furthermore, if refugees are not allowed to participate in public and policy debates about what happens to them and how they are treated here, human consequences of harsh immigration measures will be disregarded (Article 19, 2003: 34).

The Future of Refugee Narratives in Britain

In the context of the above, scrutinising the policies and procedures surrounding the asylum determination process remains of the uttermost importance, especially since the NAM is not bringing improvements to the asylum system as swiftly as was intended. Although the NAM has made some positive changes, the UNHCR remains concerned with regards to the assessment of credibility of the claimants' story, and the approach to the establishing of facts in asylum decisions (UNHCR, 2007). In addition, a very recent report by the National Audit Office (NAO, 2009) states that although case ownership has improved the process of managing asylum applications, in over 25% the Full Screening Interview does not happen, and key information about a case is lost. Finally, the Home Office is not removing as many failed applicants as it intended, which leads to a range of consequences, not least the situation of those whose claims have been refused. Many 'failed asylum seekers' end up living in detrimental conditions, surviving through the charity of others, living mainly on the streets (Amnesty International, 2006). Given that asylum claimants have to rely on their life stories as the basis for the claim for asylum, it remains imperative to continue the academic study and scrutiny of the use of personal narratives during the asylum determination procedure.

In recent years debates have slightly moved away from refugees and asylum seekers, not least because the numbers of claims have decreased⁵⁸. However, as part of the wider social cohesion debate, discussions around managed migration and the integration of refugees and migrants have continued unabated. Anxieties about ‘inassimilable’ new migrant groups, the emergence of fundamental religious views, as well as a focus on the notion of ‘Britishness’ and citizenship amongst politicians and the media have continued to shape immigration discourses (Rutter, et al, 2007; see also McGhee, 2006: 119 and Back et al, 2002). Meanwhile, there is a lack of interest in how refugees and migrants cope with their settlement in this country, or with their process of integration into a culture that is alien to them. Often political as well as academic debates on refugee settlement are centred on the structural processes of integration, and the voices of refugees themselves are rarely heard or analysed (Rutter et al, 2007).

Although there is more interest in researching the experiences of integration of refugees (Atfield et al, 2007; Rutter et al, 2007), often the focus of research and of policy contexts remains with refugees and migrants integrating through their communities⁵⁹. This study has shown that it is important to facilitate the integration of refugees as individuals, since many individual refugees need time to access or develop links into social networks. Furthermore, individuals devise imaginative and productive strategies to achieve a sense of integration and belonging, and should perhaps be supported more to do so as individuals. Finally, if policies were designed to tap into individual strategies to

⁵⁸ 28,300 asylum applications in 2006, and 27,900 in 2007, thereby moving the UK from third to fifth most important destination for asylum seekers in industrialised countries (UNHCR, 2007).

⁵⁹ For example the recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation reports (2009) *Empowering Birmingham’s Migrant and Refugee Community Organisations* and *The Potential of Migrant and Community Organisations to Influence Policy*

integration, both individual refugees, the social networks and refugee community networks, as well as policy makers could benefit from the wealth of creativity as demonstrated in this study. I therefore argue that individual refugee voices should be included more in the policy making process, although this may be a challenge for both policy makers and the voluntary sector (Article 19, 2003).

Political Importance of Telling Refugee Stories

This thesis started by explaining that in the current international economic and political climate it is going to become more and more difficult for refugees to reach a place of safety and claim asylum. Many thousands of people are already caught in a situation of stagnancy whilst on their journey, trapped in between borders, unable to move forward, or to return. Within the EU, each individual member state has managed to tighten the security of its borders, and so has Europe as a whole. As a consequence refugees and migrants have hardly any chance of ever entering a European country (Schuster, 2005), and a mixture of refugees and other types of migrants is gathering in places all around the outskirts of Europe (Schuster, 2005; Yaghmaian, 2007; Moorehead, 2005).

Gibney (2001: 18) argues that these gatherings of people are a direct consequence of tighter controls on migration, and changes in the asylum paradigm. In addition, he believes that there needs to be a legal framework, designed to scrutinise the activities of ‘non-arrival measures’ in an attempt to alleviate some of their harshest consequences. However, if the voices of refugees and asylum seekers remain marginalised within public and policy debates, the human consequences of harsh immigration measures may well continue to be disregarded (Article 19, 2003: 34).

At present we live in a world where refugees and migrants are excluded to the extent that many remain trapped between borders, or as Cohen (2000: 288-292) describes it ‘out of sight, out of mind’. This study has attempted to describe and analyse the life stories of refugees, from their perspective, and it has given some insight into how and why people arrive on our shores in the way that they do. To achieve a more ‘inclusive politics of asylum’ (Gibney, 2001: 19), an approach is needed that would encourage the public of Western states to have more sympathy and understanding for the plight of refugees. An approach perhaps that would place greater emphasis on the sharing of personal experiences by refugees in public and policy discourses, as well as in wider society. Encouraging ways to include refugees, and listening to their stories may lead to the development of a ‘narrative framework’ (Kushner, 2006), which surrounds not only refugee stories, but may persuade the British public to engage with its refugee and migrant past. An inclusive engagement with the past is necessary if we want to imagine a more inclusive future.

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APPENDIX A

Fieldwork Visits and Semi Structured Interviews (12):

Afghan Association London Harrow

Fieldwork Visits for four months, interviewed manager, leading to further contacts.

AHEAD African Health Project

Fieldwork visit, interviewed manager, two individual refugees.

Community Advocacy Network Hillingdon

Presentations to ESOL and Community Advocacy classes, interviewed the coordinator.

Presentations led to number of life story interviews.

Durham Council (executive office)

Fieldwork discussion, interviewed refugee coordinator.

Gatwick Detainee Welfare Project

Interviewed the Chair person.

Greenwich Council Education Department

Interviewed Refugee coordinator.

Kurdish Advice Centre North London

Fieldwork visits for four months, interviewed manager, and one life story interview, leading to further contacts.

Minster Centre North London

Fieldwork visits, interviewed manager.

REAP Refugees in Effective and Active Partnership West Drayton

Fieldwork visits over the course of two years, interviewed the manager.

Sahara Asian Carers Project Woolwich

Fieldwork visits, interviewed coordinator.

Springfield Community Centre Stockwell

Fieldwork visits over the course of two years, interviewed the manager, one refugee worker, and one individual refugee.

Southall Community Alliance

Fieldwork visits, one life story interview.

Vietnamese Luncheon Club Plumstead

Fieldwork visits, interviewed coordinator, leading to two life story interviews.

Further Contacts:

Advice and Career Development for Somali Community
Crossways Elephant & Castle
Greenwich Vietnamese Community
Hillingdon Race Equality Council
Information Centre for Asylum and Refugees
Lambeth Asylum Team
Lambeth Young Refugees Development Stockwell
Mama Afrika Family's Association

Life Story Interviewees (all names are pseudonyms, apart from Shabibi and Mo, whose experiences have been publicized previously):

Ref 1: Zarah

Zarah came to Britain in 1999 from Iraq. She is from quite a wealthy background, and in Iraq enjoyed a good education. Zarah's father was Arab, and her mum and husband are Kurdish. Zarah left Iraq in 1999 with her husband and daughter, after she and her husband were persecuted by the Iraqi Secret Police. They claimed asylum in Britain early in 2000, and were finally granted Leave to Remain in April 2007. They have one daughter. I met Zarah a few times prior to interview, since at the time she was very vulnerable. I carried out an extensive interview with Zarah, and stayed in touch with her afterwards. I discussed my interpretation of the research findings with Zarah.

Ref 2: Moayad

Moayad is a Kurdish man from Eastern Turkey, born in 1970. He left University to join the PKK very early on in life, when he was about 19 years old. He came to Britain because when he left the PKK he felt threatened both by the Turkish government and by the PKK. I met Moayad a number of times before and after the interview, and stayed in touch for a couple of years. He suffered depression at the time, and was very vulnerable. The interview was lengthy and labour intensive, because Moayad's level of English was at beginner's stage.

Ref 3: Ruben

Ruben is a man from Bosnia, who had to flee his country when the Serbs invaded his hometown. He left Bosnia with his wife and baby daughter, and arrived in Britain in 1992. The Serbian troops occupied his hometown from about April 1992, and Ruben and his family remained there for about eight months. He describes this time as very scary and traumatizing, especially for his wife. Ruben prepared very well for the interview, he was very much to the point, and knew exactly what he was going to tell me. We are sometimes still in touch via email.

Ref 4: Abbas

Abbas is a Kurdish man from Iraq, who came to Britain in 1995. He had been active in his community by teaching 'forbidden' Kurdish language and cultural practices and had worked as a volunteer for international NGOs. He had to leave Iraq because the Iraqi Secret Police persecuted him. I met Abbas many times prior to interview, often discussing ideas for this study. The interview with Abbas was extensive, and carried out over two visits. We discussed my interpretation of his story during subsequent meetings. We stayed in touch for a number of years, until he opened his own business in West London and moved away.

Ref 5: Hameed

Hameed is a Kurdish man from Iran. He was involved in 'armed struggle' in an attempt to improve the situation of the Kurds people in Iran. He left his country because his life was in danger. Hameed is an older man. I was introduced to him by Abbas, and did not meet him prior to interview. I interviewed him at length at his place of work. We stayed in touch for a number of years, during which we discussed my interpretation of research findings. When his health started to deteriorate a while ago, he retired and stopped working at his place of employment.

Ref 6: Miranda

Miranda is a young woman from Kosovo, who came to Britain with her husband in 1999. They escaped when the Serbs invaded Kosovo, burning houses, farms and villages, and persecuting and killing many people. I met Miranda a few times, she was a young mother with a small child, who was very anxious of leaving the house, and spent most of her time inside the bedsit she shared with her husband and son. The interview was quite in-depth, and I stayed in touch for a while, to make sure she was ok.

Ref 7: Philippe

Philippe is a man from the Democratic Republic of Congo. He was very anxious and traumatized when I met him, and quite desperate to communicate with someone. He arrived in Britain in December 2000. The interview was carried out in French, in quite some depth. I met Philippe a few times, to go through the experiences he shared with me, to make sure I had understood him correctly, and discuss my interpretation of his narrative. We lost touch after a while, and I am not sure what happened to him.

Ref 9: Jenny

Jenny, at the time of interview was an 83 year old woman from Vietnam. She was born in Vietnam in 1922. Her family moved to Hongkong, where she grew up. She moved back to Vietnam with her husband in 1949 for business purposes. They finally came to the UK in 1980, as programme refugees. The interview was carried with the support from an interpreter. I visited the Vietnamese Luncheon club where I met Jenny a number of times, but only met her once.

Ref 10: Cook

Cook described herself and her family as 'boat people', part of the flow of refugees leaving Vietnam in the late 1980s. They came to Britain in 1990. Her husband had

worked for the US army in South Vietnam. After the war, this was always a problem, and the husband ‘escaped’. Cook, and their two children left a year later, by boat, and they were taken to a refugee camp in Singapore by a British ship. Cook agreed to be interviewed very reluctantly, anxious that her level of English would not be good enough. However, when we met and she started talking about her life, she managed to tell me her story very well, and afterwards told me she had quite enjoyed the interview. Afterwards I stayed in touch to make sure she was ok.

Ref 11: Hope

Hope is a woman from Zambia who came to Britain in 1999, and claimed asylum in 2000. She suffers HIV/Aids, and claimed asylum on the basis of her HIV status, but also feels threatened because her father was a famous politician in the previous government. She has been refused Refugee Status a number of times, because whilst her asylum claim was being processed she returned to Zambia to collect her daughter. Hope contacted me to arrange to meet for an interview, she had heard about my research in a local project. I met her once, and the interview was in-depth and lengthy. Although I stayed in touch afterwards to make sure she was ok, we lost contact after a while.

Ref 12: Shabibi

Shabibi is a woman from Afghanistan who came to Britain in 1984, travelling from a refugee camp in Pakistan, with her husband and three children. Shabibi understood the value of ‘telling your story’ very well, and had published her book *Where do I Belong* (Shah, 2001; 2008), in which she tells of her personal experiences of becoming a refugee, migration, and integration into British society. I spoke to her on the telephone a few times before the interview, to ensure she had a good idea of what my study was about. The interview was very in-depth and lengthy. Because Shabibi had been in Britain a long time, and had written a book of her life, she was very capable of reflecting on her own life, and on refugee lives in general. In terms of interpretation of the stories and research findings, this interview was extremely useful. I contacted Shabibi a few times by telephone after the interview, to make sure she was ok, and to explore some of the discussed issues further.

Ref 13: Proscovia

Proscovia was a refugee from Uganda, who had been in the UK with her three children since 2000. She had seen my information sheet at a project in Woolwich, and was very keen to tell me her story. As I discussed in some depth in Chapter Two, Proscovia was deported before the interview could take place.

Ref 14: Mo

Mo is a young man of Somali origin, who came to the UK from Zambia in 1995, when he was about 14/15 years old. Mo’s father had come to Britain previously and claimed asylum for Mo, his brother and sister, and his mum. Mo’s story is not so much about claiming asylum, but about settling into British society as a teenager, with a mother who suffers severe mental health problems, whilst also caring for his siblings. I met Mo quite a few times, and the interview was carried out over two meetings. Mo helped me with my interpretation of his story, and also with the interpretation of the findings in general.

Ref 15: Alan

Alan is a man from Eritrea, who was part of political ‘rebels’ during the 1970s. He had to leave his country in 1982 because his life was in danger. He then moved to Saudi Arabia where he worked for about 15 years. After this time, he continued his political activity, whilst his wife and children claimed asylum in Britain. When it became too dangerous for Alan, he came here to join his family. I knew Alan for about three years, both of us teaching ESOL classes to refugee women. I interviewed him at length, and discussed my interpretation of the findings with him.

Ref 16: Nimo

Nimo is a young woman from Somalia, who left her country during the violent conflict in 1991/1992, when she was still a young child. They fled to a UN refugee camp in Ethiopia, of which Nimo has few memories. She has no recollections of this time being traumatic, and no memories of violent activities. She arrived in Britain in 1993, and her father claimed asylum upon arrival. The process of deciding on their claim for asylum took until 2002, when they were finally given Indefinite Leave to Remain. Nimo was studying for a degree in Law at Bournemouth University when she participated in the study. I met Nimo once to conduct the interview, and stayed in contact with her by telephone for a while afterwards.

Ref 17: Natalya

Natalya is a woman from Russia who came to Britain in 1999 with her two small children. She followed her husband, who is from Afghanistan. They met in St. Petersburg at university, and married soon after. Since the end of the Cold War society in Russia changed considerably, and Natalya told me that it became quite dangerous for her husband to live there. I was in contact with Natalya by telephone a few times prior to meeting her, after which we met once for an in-depth, extensive interview. Natalya was very organised in how she told her story, and her story offered a profound insight into how individuals overcome barriers to settlement and integration, which proved useful to the interpretation of other contributions. I stayed in touch with Natalya via email for a while, and she assisted in introducing me to further fieldwork contacts.

Ref 18: Omar

Omar fled Somalia in 1978 with his wife. They moved to neighbouring Ethiopia, where he continued his political activity in opposition to the regime in Somalia. Omar travelled through many countries for about twelve years, finally coming to Britain in 1990. I was introduced to Omar by his son Mo, whom I had already interviewed. I carried out an extensive and in-depth interview with him, initially supported by Mo, to ensure his father and I would be able to understand one another. Once he was sure that we could communicate sufficiently, Mo left the interview and left us to it.

Ref 19: Anna

Anna left Russia to come to Britain in 1993, and like Natalya, she is also married to a man from Afghanistan. They have one daughter. For Anna it was from the onset very important to actively try to integrate, but she found it very difficult. It was not easy to

find English classes, or help with finding suitable work. For seven years she suffered depression and other health problems, and received very little support for this. They were given Indefinite Leave to Remain in late 2000, after seven years of waiting. I was in contact with Anna a few times by telephone, and met her once to carry out the interview.

Ref 20: Amira

Amira is a woman from Kosovo, who arrived in Britain in September 1999. She fled Kosovo with her husband and three children, and described in some detail the horrendous journey they made. Amira was very pro-active in helping her family settling in, and has become very involved in supporting other women in doing so. I interviewed Amira during one visit. It was an in-depth, and lengthy interview. I stayed in touch for a while afterwards to make sure she was all right.

Ref 21: Bob

Bob is a man from Romania who came to Britain in 1990, when there was considerable political upheaval in his country. Bob's case ran for seven years, but he was never granted asylum. In 1997 he was given a visa on the basis of being self employed, which he renewed every year. In 2003 he married an EU citizen, and in 2004 he had been here for 14 years, and he applied for permanent residency. Bob was very interested in the study, and keen to tell his story. We met a number of times for formal interviews, and many times since, to discuss my interpretation of his narrative, but also my interpretation of the findings regarding the asylum claiming procedure, of which he is very knowledgeable.