

Summary: The Texture of Narrative Dilemmas

A qualitative study in frontline professionals working with asylum seekers in the UK

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Published in the BJPsych Bulletin online by Cambridge University Press: 22 April 2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjb.2020.33>

The Home Office often cites perceived inconsistencies in asylum interviews or the perceived failure to disclose information at the earliest opportunity as grounds for refusal of international protection claims. A number of processes affect the ability of people seeking asylum to narrate past experiences fully and consistently to the professionals interviewing them.

The ability of people seeking asylum to disclose information about their past experiences may be affected by various psychological and cultural factors, particularly where there is a history of trauma. Studies on resettled refugees indicate that people seeking asylum who have sustained multiple traumas in the past often report high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. It is now well accepted that their trauma and their consequent PTSD and depression often impede people in recalling and recounting their traumatic experiences fully and consistently. In addition, it is well known that people seeking asylum who have had traumatic experiences will try to avoid disclosing such memories because of the distressing re-experiencing that such recounting may trigger. Research also suggests that external factors such as the interview room setting and the behaviour of Home Office officials can serve as triggers for ‘flashbacks’ and dissociative episodes which can in turn impair full and consistent disclosure.

The factors described above are not under the narrator’s control. These factors occur alongside the everyday experience where we make conscious choices when relating our past experiences – for example we may choose those aspects which show us up in a good light or which we believe will help us relate to our interlocutor. Such choices become more difficult where the narrative really matters. Commonplace examples of this include oral examinations and job interviews. The choices we make in such situations may be experienced as ‘narrative dilemmas’.

In this study from the Helen Bamber Foundation¹, we explored the ‘narrative dilemmas’ faced by people seeking asylum in the subjectively critical processes during which they are required to narrate their traumatic past experiences - to the UK Home Office or to doctors, lawyers, and psychologists. The study focussed on the experiences of professionals working with people seeking asylum. Eighteen professionals were recruited from fourteen different organizations that provide clinical and legal support to people seeking asylum in England. They were interviewed either individually or in

¹ The Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF) is an expert clinical and human rights charity. Our multi-disciplinary and clinical team works with survivors of human trafficking/modern slavery, torture, and other forms of extreme human cruelty. We provide a bespoke Model of Integrated Care for survivors, which includes medico-legal documentation of physical and psychological injuries, specialist programmes of therapeutic care, a medical advisory service, a counter-trafficking programme, housing and welfare advice, legal protection advice and community integration activities and services. Our training, research and medico-legal evidence is recognised globally and by the UK Government and courts.

small profession-specific focus groups. Unfortunately, though current and former Home Office decision makers were also invited to participate, no such individuals accepted the opportunity to do so.

Four main themes emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts. Unsurprisingly, one was the impact of trauma on disclosure (as identified in previous studies). The others were conscious choices to omit, alter or embellish information – which were usually made for specific but ‘benign’ reasons rather than because of a wish to mislead.

Information was often omitted because of fear of repercussions from people who exercised control over the person such as human traffickers, or state authorities in their countries of origin. People seeking asylum who felt that they had perpetrated acts of betrayal or violence often did not disclose these experiences in the first interview or meeting with a professional but sometimes felt more able to do so once a degree of trust had been established. Similarly, alteration of information might occur if survivors of human trafficking were given false information by their traffickers and complied because of threats, or due to the power they perceived their trafficker to have over them. Where there was evidence of embellishment of trauma narratives this was often related to individuals attempting to get help for their unmet needs.

The key message from this study – for clinicians writing expert reports, for solicitors and barristers involved in asylum cases, for Home Office decision makers and for Immigration Tribunal judges - is that people seeking asylum cannot be expected to tell their full story to the first person they have met in a first or single appointment, in a relationship that has no context or opportunity for trust-building. This study suggests that it is difficult for people seeking asylum to disclose traumatic experiences at a first or single meeting with a professional and therefore people seeking asylum may not do so at that stage.

We are currently exploring these issues further through interviews exploring the ‘lived experience’ of some of our clients during their Home Office interviews and medico-legal report assessments.

Access the full paper here: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/bjpsych-bulletin/article/texture-of-narrative-dilemmas-qualitative-study-in-frontline-professionals-working-with-asylum-seekers-in-the-uk/B3332C8D5202378A1F5FA17B6896CCCC>