Power and politics in migration narrative methodology: Research with young Congolese migrants in Uganda

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Abstract

This paper explores the power dynamics inherent in qualitative research involving migration narratives. Drawing on the author's experiences collecting life histories and constructing narratives of Congolese young people in Uganda, this article addresses the ethical and methodological issues of representivity, ownership, anonymity and confidentiality. It also explores the importance of investment in relationships in migration narrative research, but also the difficulties that arise when professional and personal boundaries become blurred.

Keywords: life story; narrative; methodology; migration; ethics

Introduction

Life stories and personal narratives are increasingly popular in migration studies as methods that capture migrants' 'lived experiences' (Eastmond 2007). The advantages of such an approach have been well articulated by other scholars (Eastmond 2007; Powles 2004). These include an understanding of complex migration processes through an interpretive approach; making such complex experiences more accessible to practitioners and academics who have not themselves experienced migration; counteracting homogenizing and essentializing discourses about migrants and their experiences; and, providing opportunities for migrants to directly share their experiences.

However, migration narratives also pose particular ethical and methodological challenges to researchers. This article attempts to expose some of these challenges through the lens of power relations. Drawing on my experiences with Congolese young people in Uganda, I argue that issues of representivity and representation arise in the use of migrants' narratives. Representivity refers to the degree to which individual migrant's stories can be deemed 'representative' of larger populations and thus generalized beyond the research subject(s). Representation is concerned with the differing ways in which migrants and researchers ascribe meaning to particular people and events. I thus also address the complex issues of ownership and editorial control over stories' content, as well as challenges of anonymity

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and confidentiality. The article concludes with a discussion of investing in research relationships as a way of addressing some of these challenges, but which also poses some of its own methodological and ethical issues.

While narrative methodology and its challenges are not unique to migration research, there are particularities that should be highlighted. As part of status determination processes and to access services, migrants are often required to 'tell their stories' many times in different contexts. Narratives are thus inherent to the migration experience, and research offers an additional set of circumstances in which migrants recount their experiences. Moreover, migration research takes place within politicized policy contexts, where findings can have tangible implications for migrants, whether or not this is the researcher's intention. As a result, issues of representation and representivity, discussed below, are particularly salient.

Similarly, this article draws on narrative research conducted with young people, but many of the arguments apply to migration narratives generally. This being said, the challenges may be exacerbated in research involving young people for two principal reasons. First, age hierarchies affect power relations and thus impact interactions between adult researchers and young research subjects. In particular, young people have historically been perceived as unreliable sources of information due to their immaturity (Christensen and James 2000; Qvortrup 1994). Second, dominant development discourses promote 'universal' notions of childhood and youth (Boyden 1997, 2001), thereby contributing to homogenizing notions of young migrants' experiences.

Context and methodological approach

This article draws on research with young Congolese migrants[1] in Uganda in 2004-2005. I spent 9 months in Kampala and Kyaka II refugee settlement over a 15-month period, during which a number of qualitative methods – including semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, observation, and writing exercises – were used to collect data from over 400 research subjects[2]. Of the total research population, 15 young people in each research site became key research subjects, with whom I met at least once a week and, in some cases, daily. Research was also conducted with members of their social networks, including adults, to contextualize and cross-reference key research subjects' experiences. Over the course of my relationship with these Congolese young people, I collected life histories: "retrospective account[s] by the individual of his [or her] life in whole or in

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[1] In this paper, 'migrants' is used broadly to designate people of Congolese origin who have come to Uganda as refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers, as well as those living informally without legal status.

[2] I prefer the term 'research subject' to 'participant', given the limits to participation, discussed below.

part, in written or oral form, *that [have] been elicited or prompted by another person*" (Watson and Watson-Franke 1985: 2); emphasis in original).

Combining these life histories with the other research methods outlined above, I constructed narratives to contextualize research subjects' experiences as young migrants living in Uganda. I thus make a distinction between life histories, in which the research subject is central to the telling of her/his story, and narratives, in which the researcher takes a much more directive role in situating the individual's story in a broader social and historical context. In the latter, explanatory and contextual information is provided to facilitate understanding by readers unfamiliar with the particular context. "Put simply, narrative is a form in which activities and events are described as having a meaningful and coherent order, imposing on reality a unity which it does not inherently possess. Narrative also inevitably reduces experience which, in its vitality and richness, always far exceeds the expression which a person can give it." (Eastmond 2007: 250) Moreover, in the narrative approach, the researcher draws on other data to supplement the life story and, in some cases, highlight alternative interpretations of particular events. Such an approach presents particular challenges regarding ownership and representation, which will be explored below.

Representivity and representation

Narratives have been promoted in migration studies as a way to provide detailed and intimate insight into the everyday lived experiences of migrants, thereby counteracting essentialist and homogenizing discourses (Eastmond 2007; Powles 2004). However, due to the in-depth nature of narratives, and the time required to establish rapport, record lengthy stories and construct these into narratives, researchers are only able to draw on small sample sizes. Indeed, some studies rely solely on one individual's story (Behar 1993; Eggers 2006; Powles 2004) or collate individual narratives into collective 'panels' (Malkki 1995). Even in research using multiple narratives, representivity is limited. For example, in my research, I collected life stories from approximately 30 young people. However, this is still a small sample size, which is exacerbated by non-random sampling techniques. In my study, key research subjects were not randomly or purposefully 'selected'. Rather, our relationships evolved as young Congolese migrants expressed interest in my research and gradually invited me to share more of their lives. Because participation would involve young people contributing long periods of time regularly to the research process, voluntary involvement was important. However, gender, social age (Clark-Kazak Forthcoming) and socioeconomic biases in self-selection were consciously managed by dividing time and interactions among young people of different backgrounds, ages and sex. Despite these efforts, key research subjects are not representative of the broader Congolese migrant population. In particular, individuals from relatively wealthier socio-economic backgrounds are over-represented in my study.

Studies involving one or a small number of migrants provide rich, finely grained data. Statistical generalization is usually not the objective of such research, while analytical and theoretical generalizations are still possible and valuable. However, given the topical and policy-relevant nature of much migration research, findings may be misappropriated as indicative of 'the refugee experience', thereby contributing to the over-generalization that narrative methodology attempts to prevent. Limited representivity thus poses methodological and ethical challenges in migration research. "[A]ny telling of 'a story' may be affected by race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, sexual orientation, religious background, personal history, character – an infinite list of possible factors that form the scaffolding of relationships between people" (McLean Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan 1995: 14). There is "no single, authentic, indigenous voice or reality that the researcher can discover and present to the world" (Wilson 1993: 181). Even when researchers carefully qualify their findings, the politicized context in which migration research is undertaken creates particular dangers that information in narratives may be extrapolated to represent broader groups, with concrete consequences in terms of policy and programming (Boyden and Ennew 1997).

Issues of representivity and generalizability are also related to challenges of representation – the ways in which meanings are ascribed to particular people and events (Clark-Kazak 2009; Hall 1997). In telling their stories, research subjects choose to present themselves in particular ways at particular times (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992). As such, the audience and context of the story-telling are important. Over the course of my interaction with Congolese young people, they told me about themselves and their circumstances in different ways, sometimes leading to internal contradictions in their narratives. For example, Paul[3], a young Congolese musician, explicitly promoted unity in his lyrics. In one song entitled "Identity", he attempted to "show people that we are all one. We are all children of the same father, whatever our morphology. Before, Africa was like one country, without borders, so we only had one single identity."[4] However, while recounting his story to me, and in discussions with his friends about politics in the African Great Lakes, Paul revealed extreme anti-Rwandese sentiments, including against Congolese of Rwandese origin, whom he believed should be excluded from Congolese citizenship. As a researcher gains rapport and trust, migrants may disclose information they had previously not shared. For example, only after I had known 16-year-old Salome for over a year did she tell me that she had been raped and given birth to a son. This corroborated information that her mother had shared with me several months earlier.

Migrants, particularly those seeking asylum, regularly have to tell their story to multiple government officials, refugee agency workers and service providers, who determine legal status and admissibility for programs and

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[3] All names have been changed in an attempt to protect anonymity and confidentiality. See below.

[4] I have translated all young people's direct quotations from French or Swahili into English.

services. Given the resources at stake, migrants may have an incentive to present their circumstances in particular ways in order to qualify for programs or assistance. For example, in Uganda, many of the Congolese young people with whom I worked had adopted a discourse of vulnerability when interacting with government, United Nations (UN) and non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives (Clark 2007). They understood that priority assistance and resettlement to third countries was given to so-called 'vulnerables' and thus attempted to 'fit' their stories within these categories. However, over the course of my interaction with them, many young people admitted that they did not perceive themselves to be 'vulnerable' and, indeed, believed that the categorization denied their own coping strategies. As one young man explained, "Young people are not vulnerable, but they play the system because they are obliged to do so. I am a refugee, so I must play the game as refugees are expected to. I must act weak and humble."

While researchers may thus be able to piece together much more complex narratives, there are ethical implications of doing so. First, the discrepancy between these richer narratives and the more simplistic, 'cookie-cutter' stories told to officials may reinforce stereotypical notions of migrants as 'liars' who manipulate the system (Rousseau and Foxen 2006). Second, disclosing information that migrants have chosen to suppress publicly may put them in danger or jeopardize their legal status. For example, a young Congolese male told me that he had been jailed several times for his political advocacy. However, he had decided not to tell the Ugandan government and UN this part of this story because he was worried that they would send him to Special Branch, which assesses criminal responsibility, thus delaying and potentially prohibiting, his application for refugee status and resettlement. In these cases, confidentiality, discussed in more detail below, becomes particularly important, but also especially challenging.

Appropriating 'voices'? Issues of ownership and editorial control

This discussion of representation leads to another methodological and ethical challenge in migration narratives: issues of ownership. Migrants' stories are sometimes promoted as a way to "give a voice to the voiceless". However, as others have pointed out, "Behind the writing of any story is a writer. An obvious statement, perhaps, but researching life stories asks questions of the in/deliberate hand of the researcher." (Goodley et al. 2004: 79). Researchers must thus seriously consider our role in the editorial process of translating oral data into text (Eastmond 2007: 249).

In my research with Congolese migrants in Uganda, I chose an ethnographic, but non-participatory, approach:

> While the mode is non-participatory – the researcher works from the position of final and perhaps constant ownership of raw material – the use of life story aims to emphasise the significance of a number of experiences of people […]. In this sense, while our characters have no

hand in the writing of their own stories, an ethnographic stance encourages the writer/researcher to try to authentically capture their stories in meaningful and accountable ways. (Goodley et al. 2004: 59)

I shared parts of the narratives with research subjects, who had opportunities to include additional information, but I retained editorial control (Powles 2004; Salazar 1991). Despite this non-participatory approach, compilation of life stories was an interactive, iterative process, in which young people presented themselves in contradictory ways at different times, omitting, including and revising information (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992; Powles 2004).

Regardless of how participatory the data collection, analysis and presentation may be, power relations are such that it is likely that the researcher will benefit more than the migrant(s) from the finished product. As 'authors' of published works, we ultimately reap the academic, professional, social and economic benefits – which can be substantial for 'bestsellers' – of other people's stories (Myhre 2004). This then begs the question that Patai (1991) has so eloquently stated: "Of the frequent claim that [research] […] is empowering in that it 'gives a voice' to those who might otherwise remain silent, one might well ask: is it empowerment or is it appropriation?" (Patai 1991: 147) Even when using verbatim transcripts, researchers project their own interpretations on events and choose particular sections to highlight or edit out.

Anonymity and confidentiality

A critical decision in the editing process is how much and what kinds of information to include in the narratives. Most western ethics boards place a premium on the principles of anonymity and confidentiality. For this reason, many researchers choose to use pseudonyms to obscure the identity of migrants whose narratives they publish. However, this poses a methodological contradiction between one of the stated aims of narratives – providing migrants with an opportunity to 'tell their stories' – and the reality that pseudonyms render the key protagonists 'invisible'. Indeed, many of the young people in my study wanted their real names to be used (see also (van der Geest 2003). However, after reflection, I decided to use pseudonyms for everyone. Because many young people in my study are part of overlapping networks, using real names for some could expose others who had requested anonymity. Moreover, neither my subjects nor I knew who would read the research findings and the potential impacts the study would have. Nevertheless, I struggled with this decision. Is it paternalistic to override research subjects' own preferences in the belief that I 'know best'? Am I appropriating young people's stories by obscuring their identity, and hence ownership of the narratives?

Even when pseudonyms are used, this is often not enough to protect anonymity. First, collecting life stories usually involves prolonged interaction with migrants in order to build trust and to record complex narratives over several sessions. In small communities, particularly those in which a researcher does not regularly live and work, others will likely know who was involved in the research. For example, in Kyaka II refugee settlement, where I was the only Caucasian and thus particularly conspicuous, some research subjects indicated that neighbours, local authorities and camp officials had commented on my interaction with them. I tried to alter the timing and routes I took to key research subjects' homes and also spent time with others who were not central to my study in order to provide a modicum of protection. In a more extreme case, another anthropologist chose to use pseudonyms not only for his key informants, but also himself and the village in which he worked in order to protect the identity of those who participated in his research (van der Geest 2003).

Second, narratives inherently contain detailed information about migrants' backgrounds, migration patterns and current circumstances. Given that officials often collect similar kinds of information for their case files and that migrants often belong to interconnected networks, data and 'markers' in narratives can easily be used to identify research subjects. In my own research, I chose to omit some personal details that would obviously identify a research subject. For example, Boniface's grandfather was chief of a small village in North Kivu. Even though he told me the name of this village, I did not include this information in his story, as this would clearly identify him. On the other hand, researchers have a scholarly responsibility not to suppress data that is crucial to the study's findings. Therefore, a balance must be struck between ethical obligations to migrants and academic integrity.

Investing in research relationships

When confronted with these ethical and methodological challenges in collecting and using narratives, researchers must rely on context-specific solutions to creatively weigh the richness of narrative research against the potential harm it may cause to research subjects. This context-specificity requires an in-depth knowledge of the circumstances in which migrants are living, as well as the particular strengths and vulnerabilities of individual research subjects. Nevertheless, we should be cognizant of the risks involved in blurred lines between personal and professional relationships and the conflation of research with social work.

The collection of life histories often involves sustained interaction with research subjects over long periods of time. Such interaction is necessary to establish rapport and gain trust, thereby providing an environment conducive to story-telling. However, these same circumstances can lead to ambiguous relationships, where friendships alongside professional relationships may emerge. While there is, of course, nothing wrong with friendship between researchers and the people with whom they are working, these

personal relationships can pose methodological and ethical dilemmas. First, it may become difficult for the researcher to distinguish between information disclosed in the context of personal interaction, which the migrant does not intend to be recorded in the research, and information for research purposes gathered in ethnographic situations. In these cases, the ethical principle of informed consent is obscured.

Second, personal relationships between researchers and migrants may yield differential expectations of the research. As the researcher spends more and more time with migrants and shares in aspects of their lives, migrants may believe they have certain claims over the researcher, who should help them 'as their friend'. This is particularly significant in societies, such as those in Central Africa, where extended kinship forms the basis of social, economic and political roles and allegiances (de Boeck 2005; Clark 2006). A researcher can quite quickly be 'adopted' as a pseudokin (Southall 1955) with associated responsibilities to the migrant and her/his extended networks. These could include an expectation that the researcher will provide assistance and/or that she/he will advocate on the migrant's behalf.

Third, by researching the details of migrants' lived experiences, researchers may become aware of situations of abuse or danger posed to their research subjects. In these cases, should the ethical principle of 'do no harm' be extended to include an ethical imperative to intervene to prevent harm by others? For example, over the course of my interaction with 16-year-old Rose, she disclosed that she was subject to sexual harassment by the male head of household with whom she lived. She feared that she would be raped. I felt ethically and personally moved to intervene to prevent this from happening. However, when I raised her case with Ugandan and UN authorities and local NGOs, no one was willing to help her, because she was an 'illegal migrant'. Given the lack of social services available to Rose, and my limited stay in Uganda, one colleague warned me of the methodological and ethical perils of conflating research with social work. If I was perceived to be in Uganda to 'help' people, migrants would begin to see me as another service provider. This could then alter our research relationship, making them more likely to adhere to the 'vulnerability' discourses mentioned above. Moreover, as an individual, I did not have the financial, organizational and emotional means to help every research subject I encountered.

Conclusion: Towards reciprocity and sustainability

By investing in relationships based on principles of reciprocity (Alderson 1995) and sustainability, researchers can partially overcome some of the ethical and methodological challenges highlighted in this paper. Reciprocity is important to avoid the two extremes of exploitative, extractive research, and unequal donor-recipient power dynamics. In terms of sustainability, responses should contribute to research subjects' longer-term initiatives. For example, in order to recognize the contribution that many refugee youth

leaders had made to my research, I organized a workshop for them on management issues. This workshop, during which they developed detailed strategic plans and budgets, contributed to their long-term goals of building effective organizations. It was also a reciprocal gesture: I was providing information in return for the data and access to their organizations that they had given me. When individuals confronted problems, we explored their limited options and sources of assistance within existing structures. Reciprocity involved responding to their requests for meetings or information with the same willingness and openness as they had engaged in my research: meeting them on their own terms and for their own reasons, at times and places fixed by them, even when it was inconvenient for me to do so.

The 'give and take' involved in reciprocal relationships also helped me to resolve some of the tensions related to ownership and editorial control, highlighted above. The rapport we developed over long-term relationships allowed me to query in a non-confrontational way contradictions and discrepancies in migrants' stories. The resulting narratives were thus a product of negotiated interactions, 'belonging' completely to neither my research subjects nor myself.

Narrative research with migrants offers key insights into the complex experiences of migration. However, this same complexity renders such research methodologically and ethically challenging. Researchers must be aware of these challenges before embarking on narrative research and should consciously seek to manage the risks our studies pose to migrants. Rather than assuming that our research inherently 'gives a voice' to migrants, we need to carefully consider the nature and extent of our mutual relationship and strive for reciprocity and sustainability.

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