

I'd like to share with you a short dialogue I wrote to illustrate some of the struggles I had in writing this paper...

1. Conversation with a Critical Friend....

Well that's all well and good but how are you giving the stories back? He asks.

I smile tightly, I thought I had just finished explaining that point exactly. I try again, *Its about not taking possession of their stories, instead of me taking the stories and interpreting them, I wanted the women to reflect on them and potentially benefit from greater awareness of their own meaning making processes...*

So, the women tell you their stories, you reframe them and then give them back, and ask them to reflect on them? He prompts.

Well no I haven't actually given them their stories back yet, this is another layer of telling to illuminate key events in their life stories...

So you haven't given them their stories back... He says.

I sigh, *Not as such, but the women are telling their own stories in their own words, more fully articulating their own thoughts and feelings which will help to lay them bare for further removed audiences...*

So how is this giving them their stories back? He asks.

Exasperated now, I blurt out, *Because in the telling and re-telling, they take control and publicly own their actions, and in so doing gain a deeper understanding of what these events mean to them in terms of their own identities!*

Oh, I see. He smiles.

2. Transformative and Emancipatory

My own understanding of research is that it should lead to action, for as Tierney argues:

"research is meant to be transformative; we do not merely analyze or study an object to gain greater understanding, but instead struggle to investigate how individuals and groups might be better able to change their situations" (1994: 99).

I believe that researchers have a social responsibility, primarily to those with whom we collaborate, but also to the communities in which we live,

whether it is a village or indeed the global village. We do not wear white coats and dissect dead animals, our interventions are with real people and their lives will be impacted by our words, actions and publications. All researchers take but what do we give back?

Emancipatory research requires you to work with, rather than on people, and to work for change at both an individual and a social level, and for me, working in a truly collaborative fashion means respecting, engaging and involving women in telling the stories of their lives so that an audience will hear as much as possible from the women themselves rather than from me 'about' the women, substituting the authority of experience for the more common authority of expertise.

Lawthom argues that emancipatory narrative can "*stimulate and inspire or, at the very least, allow others to rethink their own views of, say, gender differences and the expectations of women*" (2004:181) and I chose life history for its potential to give voice to women in a country where they are typically unseen and silenced. I hoped to make a contribution in Yemen by identifying and advertising both the positive benefits for society of women participating in the workforce and the barriers that continue to limit such participation. I also hoped that publishing such stories would help to raise awareness in the wider world of the ways in which Muslim women experience and choose to assert their own agency.

Given the huge appetite for tales of misery, so called 'misery porn', and the many negative stereotypes of Muslim women that abound in the media, there is a real danger that understandings of these women as powerless, oppressed, non-persons have permeated our consciousness, and may exert a powerful influence on our readings of anything these women have to say. It also otherizes them, and obscures our similarities as empathy is trumped by sympathy, the "*Oh, how awful! Do tell me more*" reflex so to speak!

As an emancipatory researcher I have a representational responsibility to these women, and just putting their stories in the public domain, whilst an

overtly political act, is not in itself enough to challenge conventional wisdom, provide a different perspective or expose readers to what Clough would describe as "*the raw truths of their lives*" (2004: 184). I wanted to put their stories out there and let them speak for themselves or stand-alone, but discovered during a limited release of excerpts from one woman's life history that the prism of misery porn meant that many people were viewing her from a distance, confining her within "*prisons of received identities and discourses of exclusion*" in the words of Best & Kellner (1991:57) rendering her both invisible and silent. The status of Muslim women is a hot topic in Europe at the moment and it is ironic that those groups who noisily denounce Islam and the veil as oppressing women, are themselves disempowering such women by denying them agency, and as we see now in France and Belgium, even choice. By seeing only the distance, and viewing women as acted on, people are refusing to enter into what Shady & Larson have recently described as "*a shared reality where all partners in the dialogue come to understand each other's position, even if they do not entirely agree with it*" (2010: 83).

But how to bring that shared reality about? I wanted to avoid speaking for these women, with all the colonial baggage that entails, but without mediation some audiences are likely to create new cages for these women instead of seeing how they have broken out of existing ones! So in the hope of encouraging women to more explicitly articulate their sense of self, I decided to experiment with self defining memories as elaborated by McLean & Thorne (2006).

Event and Telling Narratives

First I asked them to describe three events in their lives that would help explain who they are, these are known as Event Narratives. Then they were asked to write Telling Narratives, or memorable episode of having described each event to someone, and finally they were asked to reflect on why they had told the memory, whether telling the memory had helped them to better understand it, if they felt comfortable sharing it, and whether and how they would tell it differently to another audience. Each part was written separately, and the process of collecting these narratives took up to six months with each woman, and I asked them not

to look back at what they had written previously, as they composed the second and third parts. Although it took some time to collect these narratives, allowing the women to write, and do it over a period of time elicited a fuller and broader response and one that is far more detailed and reflective than using the questions in a face to face interview situation would have been.

Politics of Telling

I discovered for myself that the act of telling is profoundly political, as it implies:

1. a platform or space in which to speak
2. an audience
3. something to say (which presupposes the realization that you have the right to make that contribution and/or that it is necessary)

Telling provides possibilities for staking claim to (new) territory – it's a powerfully empowering act, to own your own story and it can be an opportunity to testify, not necessarily for yourself, but on behalf of those with no voice/platform.

I had not understood that telling stories can be powerful not only because it can allow your voice to be heard, but because it can allow those so heard to start valuing their own voice, gain confidence in themselves, their identities and what they have to offer, which can then lead to a more public assertion of themselves, their identities, and their right to be recognized and respected, which in a country like Yemen is the stuff that revolutions are made of!

What have the storytellers got out of the experience?

It has allowed them to write themselves into the story – and occupy centre stage! And in keeping with that philosophy, I would like to illustrate with Arwa's narratives about her concealed pregnancy – in her own words, of course:

Event Narrative

My pregnancy and delivery of my youngest daughter is one of my memorable memories. Nobody knew about it till I was 6 months pregnant, and delivering her was the easiest, I gave her birth in 15 minutes.

I got pregnant while my mom was away. She left for the USA to attend the graduation of my youngest sister, who was getting married in the same year in Aden. When they were back I was 4 months pregnant and I didn't want to disrupt them with my pregnancy, while the whole family was busy in the preparation for the wedding. Being the eldest, my mom depended a lot on me.

Time passed, I became 6 months pregnant, my abdomen grew a little bigger, but I was able to hide it by wearing loose clothes. It happened several times when I felt dizzy or nausea, that I disappeared till I was OK. But on the whole, pregnancy symptoms didn't show on me and that helped me to keep my secret for a longer time.

One month was left from the wedding; I had to be ready with suitable gowns. Insisting on buying bigger gowns made everyone wonder, so I had to tell them about my story. I became the talk of the family.

Because I didn't take care of myself, I got anemic and needed urgent blood transfusion. However, having my new baby girl made me forget all of my previous suffering and that incident made her very special to me. She's celebrating her 8th birthday next week.

Telling Narrative

I wasn't intending to tell them about it, but I felt I had to as they were discussing issues related to women. It happened early this month, while I was at the office that two inspectors were arguing about the capability of women in working. One of them started talking respectfully about his wife, appreciating all what she did inside and outside the house (she's a teacher). He told us how hard she works and for long hours to keep her job and to support her family. Alhamdulillah, both of them thought highly about women. I felt so proud being a mother with a full time job. Their talking stimulated me to talk about women's natural ability to multi-task.

Then I found it a good opportunity to emphasize my words by telling them about my own experience in keeping my pregnancy for about 6 months without telling my family, because I didn't feel it was the right thing to do so. My friends at work didn't notice my pregnancy as I kept working till the last day before my delivery.

I noticed mixed signs of surprise and admiration on their faces; they wondered how come I could manage to do all this without complaining. They considered me a super-woman. In fact I don't see myself like this when I know that a huge number of women are able to do great job under low living conditions.

I understand it's a male society, and no matter how good a man is, he won't admit that men are nothing without women.

Reflection

Sharing the memory of my pregnancy with two male inspectors at the office was a bit weird. I had had to tell it to support the idea that women are patient and capable of handling more than one task at a time. And since those guys were in favour of women, my memory came in its time. It was a realistic evidence which emphasized their idea. Sharing this memory with them, I was in high spirits. I felt proud being a woman and to be precise to be a working mother.

I discovered myself after that incident. I found that I'm stronger than I thought. I didn't think I would have that stamina for such a period of time. I realized that if I make up my mind on doing something, it could be done.

Wondering whether I gained anything by hiding my pregnancy, I realize that I've gained myself. It was a personal matter that I didn't want to bother anyone with, especially that we were busy with the preparation for my sister's wedding.

I like telling this memory exactly as it happened. Sharing it with others was done the same way with different persons.

Comment

I've gained myself! In her sacrifice for others she has discovered an identity, one of which she can be proud, and is happy to advertise...she likes talking about this, as she sees it supporting the strength and resilience of women, not just her. Her sense of self is hugely augmented here, by the respect given by men forced to admit to their surprise at her strength and fortitude.

Arwa has gone from being a woman who found the whole process of talking about herself so alien and overwhelming in the original life story interviews, that she was moved to tears and required frequent breaks to one who will directly relate tales of herself and her own life and struggles to MEN and feel that in so doing she is speaking out on behalf of other women – and this advocacy is all the more powerful because she's a niqabi. Having her life made a focus of attention has helped Arwa develop a sense of her own value and contribution, both personal and professional.

Conclusion

I could have started by saying this is what I set out to do, but that would have been a convenient lie and I think that the truth is far more interesting, in that in trying to make the worlds of my women more accessible to a distant audience, I helped those women to take ownership of their actions, and develop greater self-knowledge and self-worth as a result, and so on this occasion I really do feel I have been able to give something back.

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