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Working with refugees an exploration through conversations and drawings.

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Working with Refugees an exploration through conversations and drawings.

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Abstract

While the experience of refugees is explored via various avenues, the voices of the workers who support their resettlement are rarely heard. Hence, rather than focusing on the Syrian refugees and their experience of settling in the North East of Scotland, this study considered the people who support them through this often long lasting process. Their voices were captured via an unstructured interview, but also encapsulated within drawings the participants were asked to produce. The drawings allowed the significant expansion of the often cognitively controlled conversations and permitted for emotions and affect to emerge. In some cases the drawings were a summary or an expansion of the narrative, in others a contraction, as the participants appeared to struggle between their professional identity, presented within the interview, and their emotional involvement, clearly visible in their drawings.

KEYWORDS: visual sociology, drawing, refugee support, qualitative, emotions

Introduction

This pilot study focused on the experiences of individuals involved in the resettlement program of Syrian refugees, or New Scots as they refer to themselves, in the North East of Scotland.

This included professional council workers, but also artists and voluntary workers who helped in the initiatives undertaken to resettle the Syrian refugees when they first arrived and to support them over subsequent years. In total we interviewed 10 people: 4 council workers, 2 volunteers, 1 anthropologist involved in a project with a Lebanese artist working as a cultural mediator and an art director, who managed a social enterprise arts project with the New Scots in Aberdeenshire. We interviewed both the artist and the art director. Finally we interviewed a local Iman, who had been involved in the resettlement.

The council workers were professionals, tasked with specific functions in the process of welcoming and organising accommodation for refugees, as well as helping them with the bureaucratic intricacies of their status as new settlers. When they were asked about their experience, there was a sense of desire to narrate, although the conversations tended to be rather controlled. The volunteers we spoke to were two retired women with church affiliations, who also were very keen to tell us about their work with the New Scots; an Anglo-Lebanese artist, who had worked as a cultural mediator between refugees in an art centre employing them in a variety of projects; an anthropologist who was also part of this initiative and the art director managing the whole enterprise. The anthropologist, the artist and the art manager were all engaged in the same project of integration and had individually reflected on their experience; however, they too confirmed that our study was the first real opportunity to verbalise their impressions and thoughts about that experience.

The interviews were conducted in an unstructured manner. Initiated by one of the researchers (there were usually two team members at each interview) simply asking: “can you tell us about your experience of working with the New Scots?”, it then proceeded in a very non-directive, open-end way, more like a conversation. During the interview we at times asked the participants to expand, to give us examples or to clarify uncertainties. We did not

lead the conversation according to any pre-fixed set of topics. When it felt like the conversation had reached a sort of saturation point we asked the participants to draw something that related to their experience of working with the New Scots and to where they saw themselves in relation to that experience. Hence within this research the informal interview questioning came first, followed by a drawing and then an explanation and further questions about the drawing.

The drawing at the end was an add-on, almost like a slowing down, a debrief or in some cases a withdrawal from the conversation, like when a couple of our participants refused to draw, which caused a sort of glitch, at times an awkward atmosphere that we could feel, (we didn't want to push a voluntary activity). The participants were given space on their own to carry out their drawing and the interviewers withdrew, so the drawing was set as a private activity that one does alone. After they had completed their drawing, they were then asked to explain it. The drawings were personal, their take, in some instances describing both their experience but also their intricate being, their bodies. So we ended up with 8 drawings out of 10 participants.

The analysis of the unstructured interviews

We recorded the interviews, which we then listened to as a group, part transcribing, picking up on phrases, thoughts, feelings and discussing them as we went along.

We treated every meeting with our participants as a kind of case study in which all the aspects were potentially included in the analysis: the language they used, their tone, their demeanour, their expressions, even the personality they seemed (to us) to exude and project in their talk and through their drawings. We analysed each session collaboratively, looking at the narratives and the drawings in parallel, looking for themes emerging from both

communications and comparing them, noting resonances and disparities and contrasts between the two codes.

From our collaborative analysis of the interviews transcripts and the drawings, one overarching theme seemed to emerge that was able to encompass the participants verbal and visual accounts: the theme of Emotional Labour. All our participants spoke, though in different ways, of the emotions and feelings they experienced in their work with the refugees and about how they tried to find ways to deal with this group of service users who were starkly different from the service users they had worked with before in their career or as volunteers.

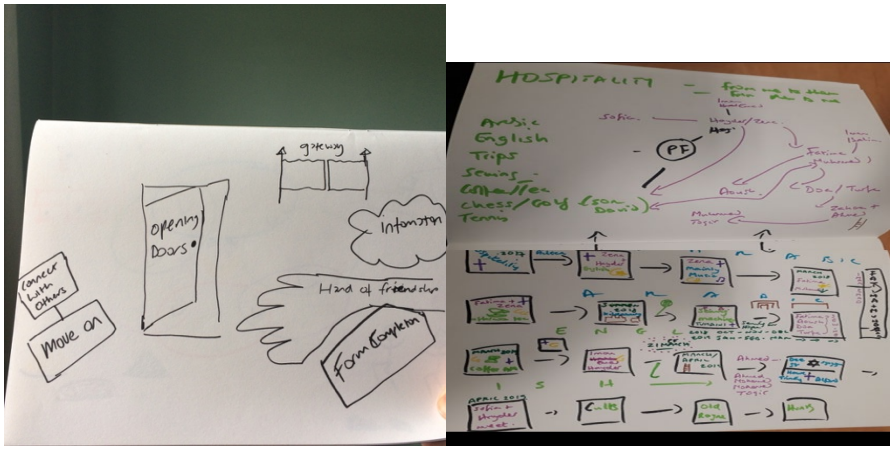
Analysing the drawings

As mentioned before, the drawings were an integral part of the interview: the request to draw was voiced at an appropriate moment in the conversation, which then resumed after the participant had finished his/her picture. Undoubtedly, though, the drawings marked a change of 'footing' (Goffman 1980) in the encounter with our participants: after being completed, it became the centre of a discussion which had so far been free floating. In a way, the drawings were turning points, devices that forced the speakers to focus on a specific object, instead of rambling through various topics. From that point on, the conversation had to be about the drawing and what it represented, as the participants were asked to explain their picture and, to an extent, all felt they had to justify why they drew whatever they drew. As mentioned above, in the analysis, we attempted to make sense of the drawings not in isolation but against the background of the words that the participants had voiced earlier to talk about their experience; our interpretations were also informed by the dialogue that came

after the drawing, with the comments and explanations that the participants offered on their artwork.

The analysis of the drawings was arguably the most challenging part of our work, but also probably the most interesting. At the end of this phase, we thought we could group the outcomes in three different categories:

Category 1. *The pictures seemed to sum up what the interviewee had said to us in the conversation.*



Drawing on the left: Professional social worker, Kim (figure 1), working in a drop-in service at Grampian Regional council to help refugees with documents, Drawing on the right: Morag (figure 2) – volunteer

Although different in many ways, both drawings make use of words to explain activities done with the refugees. In the first drawing there is an interesting use of cultural symbols, such as the hand, as in "giving them a hand", and the open door, as the social worker explained to us that her job was mainly to open doors for the refugees' integration in their new home. The second drawing was puzzling for us: Morag's drawing (figure 2) is practically a flow chart, not

pictorial but full of geometrical elements which we thought reflected her approach to the experience as a 'step-by-step' process and an itinerary through self-contained activities.

***Category 2**. The drawing expanded on what had been said or was trying to reframe the tale in a different dimension.*

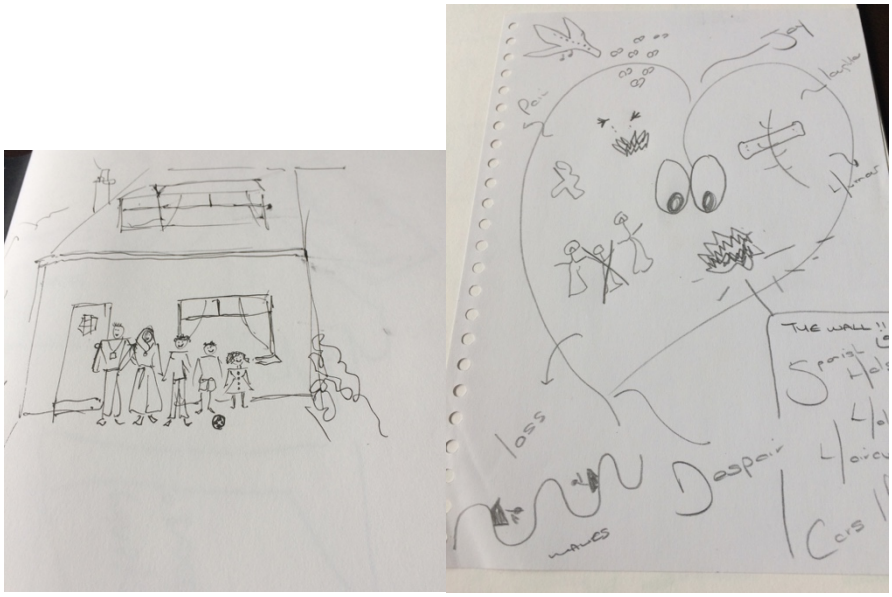
Drawing on the left: Tim, a council worker (figure 3). Drawing on the right: Meg (figure 4), a volunteer

In the first of these two drawings (figure 3), the author (Tim, a civil servant) changed perspective in progress, while he was describing the picture he drew. He started out saying the two parts represent sunny Syria and rainy Scotland, but when prompted about his presence in this picture, he changed tack and described the building as the Syrian's original home where they felt threatened wherever they went (bullets from snipers through the windows, bombs from the sky, gas in the basement…nowhere to go to be safe). Significantly, this attempt to "put himself in their shoes" had not been done in the spoken narrative, where the emphasis had been much more on the activities he did with the refugees and some of the awkward situations that occurred due to the different perceptions of gender roles by the

Scottish worker and the Muslim refugees. So this drawing can be interpreted as an exercise in empathy.

In the second picture, there is an extensive use of symbols: specifically the circle, which, we were told, indicates connection and the smiles which indicate laughter and "where there is connection there is laughter" says the author, volunteer Meg. This participant actually became very emotional at the end of the interview, when she was describing the drawing (figure 4). It is only when asked to explain and comment her drawing that Meg managed to 'tune in' to the emotions she had felt when dealing with the refugees; that was the moment when she managed to actually re-live what she had felt and made the effort to verbalise those feelings.

Category 3. *The cases where the drawing significantly diverged from the narration by including aspects that had not been mentioned or even denied in talking about the attitude towards the New Scots and the relationship established with them.*



Drawing on the left: Mary (figure 5), council worker. Drawing on the right: Joan (figure 6), manager in regional Council

In both cases the drawings were far more 'emotional' than the narratives. For both these civil servants involved in resettlement projects with refugees it was important in the narrative to affirm that they always maintained a professional role in dealing with their "clients" and that they did not allow themselves to become too close to them. However, in the drawings, they both express deep felt emotions about their experience indicating a much higher level of empathy than that declared through words. Joan drew a big heart and used words to signify how she empathises with the traumas experienced by her "clients" (figure 6). Mary told us that the house she drew as the refugees' new home is her own childhood house, where she grew up (figure 5). She told us that it is because she wants to help the refugees feel protected in the warmth of their new home.

Interestingly, two of our participants (the art director/manager and the Iman) refused to draw: with them we carried out only a verbal interview. In both cases the participants perceived the act of drawing as a potential vulnerability which could negatively reverberate on their role and powerful position. Additionally another person was present at the interview with the religious leader, who was discouraging of the drawing process.

Discussing the methodology

One first methodological observation we feel we can make on this experience is that while in the analysis of the spoken interview we could count on established methods of data analysis (mainly thematic analysis, which is a consolidated analytical tool in qualitative social science research; Bryman 2016), the same cannot be said with regard to the analysis of the drawings. When discussing them and trying to interpret their meanings and contribution to conveying the experiences, we felt adrift and not knowing what tools we could/should use to undertake the analysis. In practice and in hindsight, we drew from a wide range of theories such as some

from semiotics (shared symbols, conventional representations), some from psychoanalysis (is the drawing telling us something about the hidden/unconscious self of the interviewee?), some from psychosocial studies of organizations (is the professional role having an impact on the messages this person is formulating?). Additionally during the analysis we returned to the content of the pictures multiple times until we could identify reoccurring themes.

We contend that our experience of research has opened up a series of questions. One of the most (perhaps the most) urgent questions is:

How is drawing different to speaking?

There have been studies in the past two decades about relevance of drawings as a research methodology (Pithouse 2011; Mitchell et al. 2011; Literat 2013; Mannay 2010). Some of them concluded that drawings help surfacing unspoken thoughts and feelings, they can express whatever is not easily put into words, sometimes even attain the unconscious. So they are said to be a more direct route to emotions and feelings, underlying behaviors and semi-conscious thoughts.

Also, allowing the participants to draw curbs the researcher's potential bias, which is less easily avoided when questions are asked (Kearney and Hyle, 2004). Drawing is a freer, less constrained means of expressing an experience, unencumbered by the subliminal influences that words can convey. However, this makes the analysis more tentative and more difficult to undertake. Other scholars using this method have emphasized how their analysis of the drawings was totally guided by the participants' descriptions collected after the drawing session. In our analysis, we too used the participants' descriptions and comments about their own drawings, but we also added our own interpretations.

So what more did the drawings give us in this study?

As Weber (2008: 44) observed, "Images can be used to capture the ineffable .... Some things just need to be shown, not merely stated. Artistic images can help us access those elusive hard-to-put-into-words aspects of knowledge that might otherwise remain hidden or ignored". In other words, drawings are better than words at capturing feelings or even affective states that the individual participant herself is discovering and becoming aware of in the moment of drawing, or that she has a memory of, but can only re-live when particular circumstances occur. We believe that the use of drawings is also appropriate for getting at the memories, thoughts, and feelings and that sometimes it is that quick request to 'draw, quickly, just draw. Draw the first thing you think of', that captures something that is not easily put into words. This is particularly appropriate when the study is touching on some sensitive experience. In some of our cases, the feelings stirred in our participants were based on a willingness to empathise with the refugees' experience; they were, in some sense, second-order emotional flows. The transferring of these second-order experiences in words and pictures tells us something about the kind of empathy the participants deployed while dealing with the refugees. On this point, it was an interesting finding that the professionals felt they had restrictions on how much empathy they could deploy while striving to maintain their professional role. Especially Mary and Joan (figure 5 and 6) drew about the feelings they had, but that they did not mention them in the interview.

Conversely in Morag's account, a volunteer, there is a lot of talk about emotions, about her developing a special friendship with one of the refugees and about being 'family' to them; however, the drawing (figure 2) she produced is similar to a flow chart, it is not pictorial, it is full of geometrical elements and written words, a tool to transfer information about the

activities with the refugees rather than any expression of how it felt. Indeed, we spent a lot of time discussing this product and we seemed to all be inclined to treat this visual as an unsolicited and probably unconscious example of self-study (Pithouse 2011). Self-study is an approach to the study of personal experience in a social context. Self-study research has so far mostly been used by educators and teachers who study their selves "in action ... within [their] educational contexts" (Hamilton, Smith, & Worthington, 2008, p. 17) with the aim of improving their own professional understanding and practice. Of course, here there was no such aim; however, it felt like the whole session with this participant was mostly about her and the ways in which she involved the refugees in the initiatives she organized. She keeps on paying tribute to how good the refugees have been to her, but her contribution sounds and looks (in the drawing) very focused on activities rather than emotions and, even when emotions and feelings are mentioned, they emerge as rather matter of fact. The emotions that do emerge, from a deeper stratum regarding the participant's life before she met the refugees, point to a sense of depression and void that the work with the refugees might have helped her to soothe. We would say that for this participant the work with the refugees has had and has a therapeutic role to support her in a difficult emotional situation by giving her a sense of purpose and value. She mentions this in her interview, but in the drawing the emotional dimension is absent, replaced instead by a graphic description of 'what went on'.

The idea of the drawing as a self-study is a good interpretative key to make sense of other drawings as well (Mary -figure 5-, Joan -figure 6- and Meg -figure 4-). Differently to the literature cited, though, these self-studies were not planned or carried out as part of a professional activity, but functioned as a way of capturing and communicating what could not be said in words. The reasons why they could not be said in words are varied. However, it has

become apparent in our study that drawing as a self-study method involves making one's self highly visible and thus vulnerable to one's own scrutiny and the scrutiny of one's audience. For some of our participants this vulnerability was acceptable, something they could tolerate and perhaps even welcome. For other participants, the vulnerability was too risky so they declined the invitation to draw or, like Morag (figure 2), drew a chart and not a picture.

In conclusion this methodology of unstructured interviews in combination with drawings allowed for an in-depth and multi-dimensional insight into the experiences of working with the Syrian refugees.

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