

The Asylum Story: Narrative Capital and International Protection

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Obtaining international protection relies upon an ability to successfully navigate the host country's asylum regime. In France, the récit de vie, or asylum story, is critical to this process. An asylum seeker must craft their story with the cultural expectations of the assessor in mind. The shaping of the asylum story can be seen as an act of political protest.

Note: names and identifying details have been altered to protect the privacy of individuals' stories.

The role of the asylum story within the asylum procedure

Within a context of increasing securitization of Europe's borders, the consequences of differentiated rights tied to immigration status have profound impacts. The label of "refugee" confers rights and the chance to restart one's life. In order to obtain this label, a narrative of the person's history is required: the asylum story. It must explain the reasons and mechanisms of individualized persecution in the asylum seeker's country of origin or residence, and the current and sustained fears of this persecution continuing should they return. In France, the Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless People (OFPRA)¹ is responsible for determining whether or not the person will be granted protection, either through refugee status or subsidiary protection.² This essay examines the construction of these stories based on participant observation conducted within an association supporting exiles in Nice called Habitat et Citoyenneté ("Housing and Citizenship", hereafter H&C).

One of H&C's activities is supporting asylum seekers throughout the asylum process, including the writing of the story and preparation of additional testimony for appeals in the event of a rejection. Over time, H&C has increasingly specialized in supporting women seeking asylum, many of whom have suffered gender-based and sexual violence. These women's voices struggle to be heard within the asylum regime as it currently operates, their traumas cross-examined during an interview with an OFPRA protection officer. Consequently, an understanding of what makes a "good" asylum story is critical. Nicole and Nadia, members of H&C who play multiple roles within the association, help to develop the effective use of "narrative capital" whereby they support the rendering of the exiles' experiences into comprehensive and compelling narratives.

¹ OFPRA (*Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides* – French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless People) determines the validity of the initial asylum request; thereafter, the CNDA (*Cour Nationale du Droit d'Asile* – French National Court of Asylum) is responsible for assessing appeals made following a rejection by OFPRA.

² Under the Common European Asylum System, subsidiary protection may be afforded to those individuals who do not meet the strict conditions for refugee status but are faced with a real risk of suffering serious harm if they were to return to their country of origin.

Creating the narrative while struggling against a tide of disbelief

The experience of asylum seekers in Nice illustrates the “culture of disbelief” (Kelly 2012) endemic within the asylum system. In 2019, OFPRA reported a 75% refusal rate.³ Rejection letters frequently allege that stories are “not detailed enough,” “vague,” “unconvincing,” or “too similar” to other seekers’ experiences. These perfunctory refusals of protection are an assault in and of themselves. Women receiving such rejections at H&C were distressed to learn their deepest traumas had been labelled as undeserving.

While preparing appeals, many women remembered the asylum interviews as being akin to interrogations. During their interviews, protection officers would “double-back” on aspects of the story to “check” the consistency of the narrative, jumping around within the chronology and asking the same question repeatedly with different phrasing in an attempt to confuse or trick the asylum seeker into “revealing” some supposed falsehood. This practice is evident when reading the transcripts of OFPRA interviews sent with rejection letters. Indeed, the “testing” of the asylum seeker’s veracity is frequently applied to the apparent emotiveness of their descriptions: the interviewer may not believe the account if it is not “accompanied by suitable emotional expression” (Shuman and Bohmer 2004). Grace, recently granted protective status, advised her compatriots to express themselves to their fullest capability: she herself had attempted to demonstrate the truth of her experiences through the scars she bore on her body, ironically embarrassing the officer who had himself demanded the intangible “proof” of her experience.

A problematic reality is that the asylum seeker may be prevented from producing narrative coherency owing to the effects of prolonged stress and the traumatic resonance of memories themselves (Puumala, Ylikomi and Ristimäki 2018). At H&C, exiles needed to build trust in order to be able to narrate their histories within the non-judgemental and supportive environment provided by the association. Omu, a softly spoken Nigerian woman who survived human trafficking and brutal sexual violence, took many months before she was able to speak to Nadia about her experiences at the offices of H&C. When she did so, her discomfort in revisiting that time in her life meant she responded minimally to any question asked. Trauma’s manifestations are not well understood even among specialists. Therefore, production of “appropriately convincing” traumatic histories is moot: the evaluative methodologies are highly subjective, and indeed characterization of such narratives as “successful” does not consider the person’s reality or lived experience. Moreover, language barriers, social stereotypes, cultural misconceptions and expected ways of telling the truth combine to impact the evaluation of the applicant’s case.

Asylum seekers are expected to demonstrate suffering and to perform their “victimhood,” which affects mental well-being: the individual claiming asylum may not frame themselves as passive or a victim within their narrative, and concentrating on trauma may impede their attempts to reconstruct a dignified sense of self (Shuman and Bohmer 2004). This can be seen in the case of Bimpe: as she was preparing her appeal testimony, she expressed hope in the fact that she was busy reconstructing her life, having found employment and a new community in Nice; however, the *de facto* obligation to embody an “ideal-type” victim meant she was counselled to focus upon the tragedy of her experiences, rather than her continuing strength in survival.

³ OFPRA issued 71,738 rejections out of a total of 95,400 asylum decisions rendered (not including accompanied minors); data from OFPRA’s 2019 annual report, available online at the following URL: https://ofpra.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/atoms/files/rapport_dactivate_2019.pdf. The CNDA issued 51,399 rejections to appeals out of a total of 66,464 decisions taken, or a 77% refusal rate; data from the CNDA’s 2019 annual report, available online at: www.cnda.fr/content/download/168271/1684126/version/3/file/RA2019-CNDA.pdf.

Narrative inequality and the disparity of provision

Standards of reception provided for asylum seekers vary immensely, resulting in an inequality of access to supportive services and thereby the chance of obtaining status. Governmental reception centers have extremely limited capacity: in 2019, roughly a third of the potential population⁴ were housed and receiving long-term and ongoing social support. Asylum seekers who find themselves outside these structures rely upon networks of associations working to provide an alternative means of support.

Such associations attempt to counterbalance prevailing narrative inequalities arising due to provisional disparities, including access to translation services. Nicole is engaged in the bulk of asylum-story support, which involves sculpting applications to clarify ambiguities, influence the chronological aspect of the narration, and exhort the asylum seeker to detail their emotional reactions (Burki 2015). When Bimpe arrived at H&C only a few days ahead of her appeal, the goal was to develop a detailed narrative of what led her to flee her country of origin, including dates and geographical markers to ground the story in place and time, as well as addressing the “missing details” of her initial testimony.

Asylum seekers must be allowed to take ownership in the telling of their stories. Space for negotiation with regard to content and flow is brought about through trust. Ideally, this occurs through having sufficient time to prepare the narrative: time allows the person to feel comfortable opening up, and offers potential to go back and check on details and unravel areas that may be cloaked in confusion. Nicole underlines the importance of time and trust as fundamental in her work supporting women with their stories. Moreover, once such trust has been built, “risky” elements that may threaten the reception of the narrative can be identified collaboratively. For example, mention of financial difficulties in the country of origin risks reducing the asylum seeker’s experience to a stereotyped image where economics are involved (see: the widely maligned figure of the “economic migrant”).

Thus, the asylum story is successful only insofar as the seeker has developed a strong narrative capital and crafted their experience with the cultural expectations of the assessor in mind. In today’s reality of “asylum crisis” where policy developments are increasingly repressive and designed to recognize as few refugees as possible, the giving of advice and molding of the asylum story can be seen as an act of political protest.

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⁴ In France, a CADA (*centre d'accueil de demandeurs d'asile*) is a reception center for asylum seekers, bearing in mind that, in 2019, 132,614 asylum claims were registered with OFPRA and 43,600 places were available in a CADA. Statistics on asylum claims are taken from Forum Réfugiés Cosi annual report 2019, available online at the following URL: www.forumrefugies.org/images/l-association/rapports-activites/RA-FRC-2019.pdf.

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