

Reflections on research practice: writing difference

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Abstract

The opportunity to reflect on the research process and to openly discuss some of the questions arising from our practice as feminist scholars is relatively rare. Here I outline some of the pleasures of doing qualitative research, as well as some issues that still trouble me after more than two decades of interviewing and writing about the working lives of women migrants.

Key words

Writing, difference, talk, representation, context, voices, migration, work and employment

In 2013 my book *Working Lives* was published. To my delight, it was well reviewed by Pat Thane, an eminent UK-based feminist economic historian, in the *Times Higher Educational Supplement*: quite a coup I thought as it might reach a wider audience than many books by geographers succeed in doing. There was, however, a dissenting note at the end of the review. Where, asked Pat Thane, were the voices of the many migrant women whose working lives provided the scaffold for my argument?

Working Lives told the story of labour market change in the UK after 1945. My aim was to use a long time frame to challenge the arguments of those social and economic theorists – let's call them the transformationists – who argued that the post war history of waged work was one of radical changes. Deindustrialisation, post Fordism, knowledge work, digital and affective labour in new service economies, in a new capitalist or even a post-capitalist era, transformed the working lives of many people, they argued, although it was clear it was men's lives that were at the heart of the argument. I wanted to challenge this focus on change and on men in the transformations' theoretical accounts and argue for greater continuity when work and employment were seen through the lens of women's lives. I also wanted to provide a richer empirical picture than in many accounts.

There has, of course, been a transformation of sorts over these decades as more and more women went 'out to work', sometimes in other women's homes. However, the types of waged work undertaken by the majority of women, especially working class women, have changed rather little. Paid or unpaid, in the home and in other workplaces, women's key role has always been in the labours of reproduction, in cleaning, caring, cooking, mopping up, soothing the sick and elderly, and generally ensuring what we, as feminists, used to call 'the daily and generational reproduction of the labour force': a term I remain fond of in its accuracy. This sort of work is always demanding, and is often personal, close up and embodied.

I hope this argument about continuity was clear in *Working Lives* but it is a conventional 'academic' book in its structure and organisation. It includes large numbers of references and in the main, explanatory text and short extracts from interviews with women migrants who had moved to the UK between 1946 and 2012. And according to Pat Thane, the voices of women migrants were too muted. She wanted to hear more from more of them. The result was that I went back to my

sources and wrote a second book *Migrant Women's Voices* (McDowell 2016). This project raised some complex questions that I reflect on below.

Women's voices: talking about migration and employment

This new book is quite different from the earlier one, although not as different as I had hoped initially. I wanted to follow the model of Studs Terkel's (1972) classic text: *Working: People talk about what they do all day and how they feel about what they do*, writing a more popular book than my normal output; a book that is (hopefully) vivid and engaging, letting people 'speak for themselves' without interpretation. My book, of course, would be a more explicitly feminist collection of voices than Terkel's, as the work women talk about includes unwaged labour, work in the home, and sometimes in the community. Despite arguing for this more inclusive definition of work in the text – a now conventional claim by feminist scholars – one of the reviewers of the draft insisted I add the term 'life' to the title (I have always found it an odd juxtaposition – surely waged work is part of life?) and the publisher agreed. This reader also wanted more context and so I added a longer and more academic introductory chapter than I had intended. The second reviewer suggested that the book needed a concluding chapter. I agreed to that too and so the book already had a top and tail in my voice rather than the voices of 74 women who I had interviewed, either alone or with others as part of different research projects that I have carried out over the last twenty five years.

Anxieties about 'reusing' interviews

A number of issues became important as I thought about the shape of this book and how to include the lives of others. They ranged from anxieties about the ethics of speaking for the other to how and whether to edit the oral narratives in order to enhance the flow of an argument. I also worried about how to capture for the reader the significant world events across more than sixty years that have had an impact on why women left home at different periods. As the focus of my research since the early 1990s has been on work and employment, all the interviews that I have collected across the years are about experiences in the labour market, as well as about the other responsibilities that impinge on many women's working lives. But some of the earlier interviews had been for different purposes – about, for example, the effects of deregulation on employment practices in investment banks, for example, published as *Capital Culture* (1997), about post war recruitment by the British state in displaced persons camps, about the recruitment policies of the NHS in the 2000s. Some but not all those interviews were with women and some but not all with women born abroad. Many of the more recent interviews were explicitly for *Working Lives* and for this book, but not all of them. I returned, for example, to the conversations I had had with women who had left Latvia in 1944, and who came to the UK in the later 1940s, thinking of themselves as refugees but turned, by Government edict, into economic migrants, allocated jobs to aid the British post-war reconstruction effort, and published as *Hard Labour* (McDowell 2005). The majority of these women had died in the decade or more since I talked to them and so they could no longer give consent to my retelling of their story. Was I justified in this retelling, often in much more detail than in the original book? Their stories seemed too important to me to disappear, and *Hard Labour* had not reached as wide an audience as I had hope, in part a friend suggested as I included the work Latvia in the title. It's a place, she suggested, that almost no-one even knows where it is.

I no longer had the contact details of other women who I had interviewed as long ago as 20 years and who had moved over the years, to different jobs and some of them to different countries. Although I had received permission to publish material from our exchanges at the time, as well as guaranteeing anonymity, is it acceptable to use such material again, and in some cases two decades later? In the event, I decided it was, with the hope too that a much more expansive representation of individual women's experiences would be welcome to them, assuming of course that they might chance on my book. And in this book, I hope, they would speak for themselves more directly, rather than through the filter of an academic argument and the careful selection of short quotations by me.

A moment's reflection, however, reveals this hope as naive. As social scientists undertaking qualitative research, however much we imagine or want to believe otherwise, we who select the topics to talk about. We make the initial contacts, decide who to include and who to exclude from our studies; we who orchestrate the exchanges, although not always on the terms we decide nor in the location we might choose; and of course we re-present the lives of the women who are kind enough to talk to us to conform to a particular style of argument. Nevertheless in *Migrant Women's Voices*, I hope that the clear accents and opinions of the 74 women can be heard loud and clear. Let me take some of their narratives, explain how I first came to hear their stories and then through examples illustrate some of the key themes.

Stories of displacement: identifying women migrants

The overall context of the book – its framing – is the interconnections between migration and work as the British economy shifted from one dominated by manufacturing in 1945 to a service economy by the end of the 20th century and as the origins of people born abroad but moving to the UK – for a range of reasons – became more diverse, even as entry to the UK became more difficult. Nevertheless the numbers of people not born in Britain grew, making the country a more interesting place to live in. The earlier years of the second half of the twentieth century were dominated by people connected to the UK through its colonial history. In the 1950s, women from the Caribbean, heeding the plea from the 'mother' country to come and work in the public sector, came to the UK and many of them found employment as nurses. From the late 1960s, women of South Asian origins but living in East Africa, came to Britain, choosing or having to move as Africanisation policies affected their economic and social status, culminating in the expulsion of South Asian people from Uganda by Idi Amin in 1972. The women from the Caribbean came in the main as single women, whereas the women from East Africa were much more likely to be married. But women also came to the UK over these early decades from other countries: from Ireland, for example, with de facto rights of citizenship; from the Baltic States connected to the UK not by imperialism or rights of citizenship but through the disruption of World War II. In later years women came from the Balkans, where lives were also disrupted by war, as the former Yugoslavia splintered into factional states; from the US, South Africa and Australia to seek training or short term employment; from Poland, Rumania and other countries affected by the decline of the communist bloc, sometimes entering the country without papers or permission, and after the expansion of the EU in 2004 and later in 2009 as citizens of the expanded union. Each of these women had a story to tell of displacement, of anxiety regret and nostalgia, of discrimination as they sought waged work and rebuilt their lives. But they also imbued their narratives with hope, hard work, pleasure in new opportunities and ambition for their children, often born in Britain.

The strategies I adopted to identify and interview women migrants varied. They are by no means a representative sample but instead reflect their method of selection, although I believe they capture some of the diversity of post-war migration into the UK. I did not try to include women from all the countries who have sent their citizens to Britain, but the geographical coverage is wide. Women born in Jamaica and Barbados, in the US, Canada New Zealand, Australia and South Africa (the old dominions), in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, in Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia, Estonia, Ukraine, Poland, Latvia, Kosovo and Russia all tell their stories. My primary aim as a labour geographer was to capture the range of women's work in the UK, as it changed after 1945 and so women who worked as nurses, waitresses, cleaners, hairdressers, driving buses, on the line in the car industry, as teachers, doctors, financiers, sewing toys at home, as hotel receptionists, retail assistants, child minders, machinists sewing shirts and car seat covers, weavers and spinners in the cotton and woollen industries are represented but there are no clerics, sex workers, police or librarians.

The first stories are told by women who grew up in Latvia in the brief years of pre-Second World War independence but who fled as the war came to an end, walking across Latvia, finding sea transport to parts of German occupied Poland and walking or travelling by cart or in freight cars across Germany to find refuge in camps in the British zone. In the early 2000s I talked to more than 20 women born in Latvia before 1930, finding them through a range of methods including web sites, personal contacts and through interviews in a home for elderly Latvians in Leicestershire. My initial aim, in a British Academy funded project, had been to talk to them about their employment and their domestic lives in the 1950s – about what were then called 'women's dual roles' but these opinionated, doughty and robust women told me in no uncertain terms that this was not as interesting to them as telling their stories of displacement and mobility and so my initial research aims changed. Perhaps as social scientists we are not always as in control of our research as we sometimes suggest. These women were recruited by the British State to work in female dominated sectors of the economy as British women were encouraged to embrace domesticity and maternity by returning to their homes at the end of the war.

Chronologically in terms of the structure of the book, the next group of women whom I talked to were women from the Caribbean who had come to the UK either already qualified or to train as nurses. I contacted them – and many other women born abroad but who had or were working as nurses, through an advertisement in the Royal College of Nursing's newsletter (Batnitzky and McDowell 2011). Anxious to tell their stories of various types of discrimination, from being corralled into an inferior training route to condescending doctors as well as racism from patients and patients' relatives, more women than I could possibly hope to interview answered the advertisement. The women from East Africa were part of two different research projects: one about the so-called 'great Grunwick strike' between 1976 and 1978 of women working in a photo processing plant in north west London (see McDowell et al 2012, 2014), the other about employment in the Ford plant at Dagenham in the 1980s. Like the other studies, this work was done in the 2000s, but the interviews with women working in professional occupations were different. A small number were women whom I had interviewed between 1992 and 1993 as part of a study of the impact of deregulation in the financial sector in the City of London, initially funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council. Some of the doctors, nurses, occupational therapists in the NHS and the cleaners and receptionists in a London hotel were part of a study of employment policies as the EU expanded (see McDowell et al 2007), but other interviews, in the main of women

who had moved more recently were undertaken explicitly for this book. They included academics, nannies, and a bus driver, for example, all of whom had grown up in parts of Eastern Europe before the end of communist domination, providing a satisfactory link back to the early post war period as well as capturing both the growing diversity of migrants' origins and occupations and marked continuities. This eclectic strategy perhaps raises questions about the validity of the comparisons as well as about the varying depth of material about migrant journeys and working lives when the original interviews were for rather different purposes. However, this seems to me perfectly acceptable when the aim was to range widely across space and time. Furthermore, the structure of the narratives, as well as their content displayed rather remarkable consistencies across the different sets of interviews.

Similarities and differences across the post-war decades

One of the most noticeable features is in the similarity in the ways in which the stories of the migratory journey are presented. Unlike the typical structure of an odyssey, in which the traveller is at the heart of the narrative, overcoming great odds by heroic effort, these women told smaller stories of chance, structured often through the medium of material objects – of belongings left behind (a precious ring or photo), of small objects treasured on the journey (a pair of silk gloves worn by a young women's mother to attend the opera or a yellow blouse worn on a sunny day) and of new tastes in a refugee camp (recollecting the scent of an orange during the war or the first taste of white sliced bread given to a young woman by a US soldier) or sights and smells when England was reached (trees in blossom for a young Latvian women but dismal grey skies and snow for young Caribbean and South Asian women).

The stories about employment across six decades also display noticeable similarities. For many but the most highly qualified, typically women from what used to be termed the 'Old' Commonwealth (a synonym for white people), their stories were ones of downward social mobility as qualifications gained elsewhere were not recognised in the UK. Almost all women told stories of discriminatory treatment, on the basis of skin colour and accent as well as gender, and of limited promotion opportunities, often on the grounds of gender, as they often found themselves at the bottom of a hierarchy of eligibility for jobs, trapped in low status and poorly paid work. But differences are also important, especially in the impetus to migration. Here that wide range of factors that leads to a decision to move is evident in the narratives. War, hunger, civil unrest, domestic violence often led to forced displacement, whereas class differences, as well as differences in material circumstances were reflected in the stories about ambition, new challenges, the desire to travel in Europe or to gain additional professional qualifications.

The status of memory

The status of oral narratives is, of course, an issue for all of us who work using this method. My aim was to listen to women telling their own stories of migration and their subsequent working lives in the UK, relying on their own memories of events that for some women were not only distant in time but included recalling traumatic events. Between the initial migration and their recollections, they might have moved several times, both jobs and home, had families, been 'home' – in itself a source of unhappiness for some, including women from Latvia after the years of the Soviet occupation – learnt new languages, and generally experienced life events. At the same time, the UK changed significantly over sixty years, as social changes altered views of migrants from different

countries (not always in a positive way) and as a series of reforms changed women's control over their own lives. As the expanding scholarship about memory has made clear the past is unpredictable; it is never settled, never over, but is instead reconstructed in the present. How am I, or readers, to judge the stories included in the book? Would the women bankers who told me stories of discrimination in the 1990s have reported a different version if I had talked with them in the early 2000s when women working in investment banking were more likely to take action against discriminatory treatment. If I had met them in 2010 when the broader public had a better understanding of the masculinist culture of investment banks after the financial crisis revealed the attitudes and behaviours of what one woman in 1992 referred to as the 'big beasts' of this world – all men – would they have revised their narratives? Are women more able to tell stories of harassment and rape now than in earlier decades, or as they age and experiences perhaps lose some of their immediacy? For other women perhaps their narratives might not have changed – telling and retelling stories fixes them in the mind in a singular form, despite new 'events'.

Fish in the stream?

A set of related issues also arises for readers. How much of an understanding of Britain's changing place in the world since 1945 is necessary to place these stories in context? Is a knowledge of world history, of the new currents of globalisation, or of the changing regulation of migration, an essential requisite for a reader? This is an anxiety that the noted biographer, Hermione Lee, called the problem of the fish in the stream. Is the focus on the fish that is the women whose stories are at the heart of the book, or the context of these stories – the stream. Perhaps the narratives are immediate enough to evince a response, without understanding the politics and legislation that affected them. Is it possible to understand enough of the story of a woman like Hana without knowing about civil wars in Africa, or changes in EU legislation? Hana, who fled Eritrea for Sudan, during the civil war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, was imprisoned in Somalia and ended up living for several years in the Netherlands, before moving to the UK, even though she hoped to go to Sweden. She had a plane ticket with KLM to Stockholm but in transit in Amsterdam was forced to seek asylum there as EU legislation demanded.

Speaking for themselves or appropriating Others' voices?

Capturing these stories of hardship, dislocation and rebuilding, laying out the similarities and differences was, perhaps, the easy part of constructing the book. I felt privileged to be the conduit through which the lives of 74 astonishingly resolute women might gain a wider audience. However, two large questions continue to worry me. First, is it possible to achieve my desire to let the reader hear these women speak in their own voices? Have I re-presented what they told me accurately and responsibly? What about stories of sexual or marital violence that may not have been told before? Should they have been made public? And might these women actually be identifiable, despite my changing their names, as their ages and origins are included? I did almost no editing as I wanted to present narratives that reflect their vernacular speech, their sentence structure, accents and expressions without in any way tending to condescension. I can hear the women speak – the Germanic sentence structure of elderly Latvian women who never quite lost their linguistic heritages, the different intonations of women from Eire or particular Caribbean islands, the rapid speech of a US occupational therapist, the hesitancy of some of the more recent migrants, or the forcefulness of a young Polish woman, disgusted by the attitudes of the British public she

encountered in her job as a bus driver. I wonder whether but do hope that readers too may capture some of this linguistic variety, especially if they share origins with some of the women in the book.

But this hope leads to my second anxiety about the reception of the book or rather about plans for publicity. Clearly, I want people to read the book but should I, and how should I, publicise it? In whose voice can I tell the stories? I have been invited to a book festival later in 2016 and said yes before thinking seriously about what this might entail. I feel uncomfortable, especially in a city – Liverpool – with a history of migration, with the thought of reading from the text. Writing difference is not the same as speaking difference. These voices and stories are not mine. I am a white British ‘native’ at least for the last two generations. My father’s family were migrants from Alsace Lorraine, although he was born in Manchester in 1916. But what right have I to tell these stories in front of a live audience? Is my anxiety about an oral performance, when I have fewer doubts about the value of the written record, somehow self-indulgent or is it warranted? But then, as McLuhan told us, the medium is the message and I feel as if I am appropriating Others’ histories when I recount these stories out loud. While I hesitate to ask any of the women whose stories make up the book to publicise it, one way forward is perhaps to ask young women from similar class and ethnic backgrounds to participate in events with me. Working in a ‘global’ university like Oxford with wonderful young women students from all sorts of backgrounds is a considerable advantage here and a strategy I am thinking about.

Finally, if the book succeeds at all, I hope it is because it meets my original intention - that the telling of these inspiring stories of ‘ordinary’ but exceptional lives might help to challenge negative preconceptions about the impact of migration into the UK, of the xenophobic reactions to migrants who ‘steal our jobs’ by revealing the astonishing contributions women migrants have made across sixty years to the UK labour market, economy and society.

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Bio

Linda McDowell is a feminist labour geographer interested in economic change, labour market restructuring, migration and new divisions of labour. She is currently Professor of Human Geography at the University of Oxford. She tries to write across disciplinary boundaries and so publishes in sociology, youth studies and feminist journals as well as in geography.