

‘Everybody is welcome, but..’ Talking of emotions and with emotions about refugees; a psychosocial discursive analysis

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Abstract

This paper follows the discursive and emotional work around constructions of refugees in a focus group with non-refugee mature students at a British University. The psychosocial discursive analysis of the data illustrates how participants were split into two camps, emotionally arguing for and against a refugee presence in Britain. The paper offers an exploration of the various discursive constructions of refugees used by the participants to warrant their position. Side by side with a discursive analysis, the paper also provides a psychosocial investigation of the emotional dimensions and states of mind associated with the constructions. Theoretically and methodologically, the paper argues for the need to look psychosocially at the resistance and hostility towards the ‘other’: in social and political relations but also in their emotional and psychodynamic manifestations.

Introduction

This paper follows the discursive and emotional work around constructions of refugees in a focus group with non-refugee mature students at a British University.

According to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is a person who, "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail him/herself of the protection of that country". A person who is seeking to be recognized as a refugee is an asylum seeker.

The UK is a signatory to the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which means that it has a responsibility, under international law, not to return refugees to the place where they would face persecution. Nonetheless, the issue of immigration has been a controversial political issue since the late 1990s. Both the ruling Labour Party and the opposition Conservatives have suggested policies perceived as being "tough on asylum" and the tabloid media frequently print headlines about an "immigration crisis". Yet, official figures for numbers of people claiming asylum in the UK were at a 13 year low by March 2006.

Concerns have been raised about the treatment of those held in detention and the practice of dawn raiding families, as well as the holding of young children in immigration detention centres for long periods of time. Human rights organisations, such as Amnesty International, have argued that the government's new policies, particularly those concerning detention centres, have detrimental effects on asylum applicants and those facilities have seen a number of hunger strikes and suicides (Cooley and Rutter, 2007).

While research has demonstrated that the majority of the British public supports the principle of offering protection to those who are in need of it, it has also shown that people are skeptical that asylum seekers coming to the UK are genuinely in need of that protection (Lewis 2005 in Cooley and Rutter, 2007:176)

From this socio-political climate came the impetus for the research referred to in this paper. The project¹ was motivated by the belief that only by knowing and understanding audiences' constructions, expectations and fantasies about refugees, could we understand people's attitudes towards the refugee issue.

This paper offers an exploration of the various discursive constructions of refugees used by the participants to argue for and against a refugee presence in Britain. It shows that the 'refugee's identity' is a highly mediated entity that people construct in relation to each other, to the media and to their own beliefs and feelings about what is different from themselves. The discursive analysis of the different ways in which the refugee identity is constructed, therefore, pays particular attention to the possible psycho-social purposes, ideological and emotional functions, of these constructed identities.

Not all constructed identities carry equal status. Some, like 'the bogus refugee' (vs. the 'real refugee') are more visible in the media, more often employed and in that are more hegemonic. Yet, what the data illustrates is that the power of a neat differentiation between 'bogus' and 'genuine' refugees might not simply come from its manipulative and inflammatory use by the media, but might also have the important function of creating order in confusion, through the harnessing of strong emotions raised by the issue of asylum. Despite their passionate arguments for particular constructions, the participants, who were non refugees², illustrated a widespread sense of confusion over the identity of the refugee, its status of innocent victim and whether they are good or bad news for the country. Some hinted at this being the symptom of wider moral confusion about the current state of the world. Furthermore a rigid categorisation seemed to help keep at bay a much more insidious discomfort about refugees for simply representing 'the other' with all the related unknowns and anxieties.

This paper, therefore, does two things. In the first place it closely follows the various constructions of refugees, with an eye on the discursive resources underpinning them, as well as their function and their implications for the refugee and the speaker. At the same time, it approaches the data as a ground on which a battle between two very different states of mind is fought. Hence, each construction is important in itself – because it tells us of how people struggle with the refugee issue and make sense of it – and because it tells us of the oscillation between a desire for a hardening of socio-psychological and material boundaries on the one hand, and a more empathetic and tolerant acceptance of refugees.

Following a section on methodology, the bulk of the paper is taken up by the data and its analysis. The analysis section follows the back and forth dances between negative and

¹ The project was funded by a Research Grant kindly offered by Birkbeck, University of London

² With the exception of one student who identified himself as coming from a family of refugees. If other students were also refugees, they did not claim this identity nor did I demand it.

more sympathetic definitions. The paper concludes with a psychosocial discussion on the 'other'.

Methodology

Overall this paper offers a discursive reading of the data from a focus group on asylum seekers. The participants' statements are not taken to be representative of the individual's personality, personal attitude or underlying cognitive processes (Edwards & Potter, 1992, 1993; Potter & Wetherell, 1987, 1995) but as articulations of current, socially available narratives on refugees. I am particularly interested in how 'the refugee' is constructed, what discursive resources are employed and for what purposes. Purpose here is intended in the sense of what the statement or construction achieves, i.e. its function as 'speech act' (Austin, 2005; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), rather than a more traditionally psychological idea of motivation. Whilst motivation, overall, involves intentionality, function looks at the operation of statements, ideologies and, crucially for this paper, a more subconscious regulation of emotions. Hence, discursively, grappling with the function of a particular construction means engaging with the historical social resources that underpin them, the conditions that make them possible as well as their material and ideological contexts. In this sense, discursive constructions inform and regulate what can and cannot be done and thought (Burman and Parker, 1993)

How people position themselves and others, however, occurs both actively and passively; subjects can exercise agency in choosing their constructs while also being defined by the availability and accessibility of discourses (Gillies, 1999). What people say, then, is discourse in action, ideology that has become lived experience. In terms of analysis, a Foucauldian reading is used to examine constructions of subjectivity and the broader social issues to which they allude (Burman and Parker, 1993), whilst discursive psychology focuses on how the participants use language during the interview process to promote a particular account or to counteract others (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Willig, 2002).

However, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Seu, 2006), despite its high potential in the unravelling of complex ideological and rhetorical speech operations, most discursive analyses fall short at analysing the emotional dimension of lived ideologies. Something that psychoanalysis is particularly good at. As Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman point out, psychoanalysis "enables us to ask questions about why and how specific formations of subjecthood come about; that is, what purpose they serve, what anxieties are actively defended against, what aspirations fulfilled" (2003)

I am very aware of the potential epistemological and methodological pitfalls of trying to bring together such epistemologically different approaches. Are emotions in this paper treated as discursive or as extra discursive? Are they simply an effective rhetorical tool used to strengthen one's claim or do they have a separate status, sitting next to discursive resources and yet more submerged, badly articulated in a kind of twilight zone? How to reconcile the Foucauldian rejection of the existence of a deeper, historical self, hidden from consciousness and yet driving our actions, which lies at the core of psychoanalytic theories. How to theorise my position as researcher in relation to these dilemmas? These

are highly debated questions (see, for example Wetherell 2005 , Hollway and Jefferson, 2005, 2000) both theoretically and methodologically. But this is not what this paper is attempting to do. Rather it is an attempt to grapple with a very complex issue that refuses to settle comfortably in only one of the camps.

Billig (1997a, 1997b) has usefully attempted to bridge this divide, by arguing that, far from being detrimental to a discursive analysis, the ‘dialogic unconscious’ and psychoanalytic concepts in general could be useful ”for a discursive psychology which has an acknowledged critical, political stance” (1997b:142). When a discourse analyst defines a participant’s statement as a disclaimer for their racist comments, for example, (Billig 1997b, Wetherell & Potter 1992) s/he is alerting the reader not to accept those disclaimers, thus leaving open the possibility that the participant’s statement is actually motivated by unacknowledged racism. If we accept that social order is reproduced through speech, repression can be discursively seen as a way of regulating what can be said or not said in a local moral context. As Frosh (1989) argues repression, then, is not a universally static process, but something which is part of ideological and socio-historical currents. I will return to these points later, when discussing ‘discursive projections’.

My sense, in analysing the data, was that neither a discursive nor psychology of emotions would alone give an exhaustive explanation of the richness and the thickness of the discussion presented. I have therefore brought in psychoanalytic explanations, not as ways of making sense of participants’ individual unconscious, but as emotional positioning that, like discursive ones, allow the agent to perform a psycho-social, discursive and emotional, act. I find Cooper and Lousada’s (2005) methodological position particularly helpful. In the chapter ‘Methodological reflections: Clinical sensibility and the study of the social’ they present their methodology as “not primarily about the deployment of psychoanalytic concepts and theories in relation to welfare and society, but about the application of a clinical *sensibility to the study of these phenomena*. Our primary intention was that the book should be an exercise in such an application, rather than a theoretical or methodological defence of its possibility.” (pg.204) (emphasis in the original). Similarly, whilst closely following the various constructions of refugees by non refugees, with an eye on their function and their implications for the refugee and the speaker, this paper also looks at the data as the ground on which the battle between two different states of mind is fought.

Eighty one mature students from a University setting originally agreed to participate in the two part study and filled in the questionnaire consisting of an instruction sheet, a copy of the poster of an Amnesty International refugee campaign, a sheet asking for demographic details and 29 items. The items on the questionnaire were derived on the basis of results in two pilot studies carried out by the author on audiences’ responses to information about Human Rights abuses. Completion of the questionnaire took approximately 15 minutes.

The poster of the Amnesty International asylum campaign was hung up in the classroom and a copy of it was attached to every questionnaire. The poster depicted some children and a woman staring at the camera, whilst sitting at the back of a truck, presumably in the process of being transported somewhere. The key message of the poster was: “A refugee is someone who is in danger – of being killed, imprisoned, tortured, or persecuted – because of their beliefs, nationality, race, gender or sexual orientation”

Participants were told that participation was voluntary and that they would remain anonymous. They were then instructed to read the text on the poster and afterwards to fill in the questionnaire. They were then reminded again that participation in the second part of the study, which consisted of a group discussion, was voluntary. Anybody who did not want to take part was allowed to leave the room.

One participant did not fill in the general information. Of the remaining 80, 43 were female and 37 were male. The vast majority of participants were mature undergraduate part-time psychology students who took part voluntarily. Participants varied in socio-economic status and academic background, although all had at least A-levels or equivalent. Participants were from various ethnic backgrounds, although the majority was white. Age ranged from 22 to 66 years.

Only 16 members of the heterogeneous, pre-existing focus group chose to actively participate in the discussion. Discussion participants used the numbers they had on their respective questionnaires for identification. Numbers 14, 32, 60, 62, 72, 74, 78, 79, 82 were women (n=9), numbers 1, 7, 9, 51, 55, 57, 59 were men (n=7). The discussion took place after a lecture in social psychology. The group leader was the lecturer, Bruna Seu, who is referred to as “Bruna” in the transcript. The focus group discussion was taped on 4 tape recorders, placed at different locations in the room. Three microphones were passed around so that speakers would be audible to each other and on tape. Anonymity was assured by assigning the questionnaire numbers to participants and they were instructed to say their number before making a contribution to the discussion. The discussion lasted for approximately one hour.

I have tried to keep the statements in the same order as they developed in the discussion, illustrated by the frequent references to what preceded them ³. This is particularly important considering that this was an unstructured non-directive discussion, where participants were invited to contribute to the discussion and simply took turns to speak. At some points many hands would go up at the same time, indicating that some neuralgic point had been touched. There is no space to explore this issue further, but hopefully, the sequence in which the extracts are presented will give a sense of how the discussion developed and how the understanding of these themes can only come from a contextual analysis, particularly as some of these ideas were expressed as a reaction to what was said previously and the emotions this evoked. This is in line with the view that arguments are constructed in relations to counter-arguments (Billig, 1987; Verkuyten, 2003)

I will be referring to the subject of the focus group as refugee. This is partly for reasons of consistency with the Amnesty’s campaign which was used as prompt and partly as a recognition of the phenomenological status of the refugee as someone looking for refuge, for whatever reason. And finally to provide a stable label against which to explore the diversity and fluctuation of definitions used by the participants.

³ As it was impossible to include the whole of the discussion, big chunks have been left out. The selection was directed by interventions – or parts of one – that contained a clear definition of refugees.

To begin the analysis I first ran a word search using NVivo software. The term most used was “asylum seeker”, which occurred 30 times in the discussion. However, this term was not always used as an equivalent for ‘victim of Human Rights abuse’. There was an ongoing struggle to find the divide between those asylum seekers who are refugees in the sense the A.I. poster defined them and who were seen as victims in need of help, and those whom the participants called “economic migrants” whose right to asylum was generally denied. The term ‘victim’ only occurred three times in the discussion, two of which were by the focus group leader. At first sight, this could imply that the participants were not talking about victims at all. Although this is true for large parts of the discussion, there was talk about the victims of Human Rights abuses. They called them “actual” asylum seekers, “sufferers” or “those, whose Human Rights ... are being abused”.

The many faces of the refugee; WHO ARE THESE ASYLUM SEEKERS?

A close analysis of the discussion allows for a mapping of the ground over which this definition is fought, and the connected invitation to action. In line with its dilemmatic nature (Billig *et al*, 1987) the group discussion developed around several polarities. The political vs. economic divide was crucial and underpinned many of the other differentiations. Another polarity concerned whether refugees should be granted the status of genuine sufferers or not. Whether there really are too many refugees – with accompanying imagery of ‘flooding’, ‘being everywhere’ or whether more would actually be beneficial, is another. But the overriding issue, woven through each statement and construction, is that of emotions: what emotions the participants had, didn’t have or felt they ought to have.

Overall, as the first participant succinctly put it: “it’s a very emotive subject for most people”

82: [...] asylum and the issue of asylum impacts most on everybody living in this country. It’s, it’s a thing we see (1) the most of [...] . Ahm, I live, <well, I work> in east Croydon [Bruna: Hm] and the roads are full of people who are claiming asylum there, you know, they uhm all queuing at (.) whichever (.) Home Office, ahm, application, but (1.5) it’s an issue that makes, I think, everybody, even me, it invokes an uncomfortable reaction >because< I know it’s a very emotive subject for most people

The very first statement in the focus group sets the scene in a helpful way: firsts it echoes and reiterates the all too familiar imagery of large numbers of refugees “*the roads are full of people who are claiming asylum*”. It has to be noted that all but one participant (number 57), even those who described themselves as Human Rights activists, seemed to agree that there was an “asylum problem” and the cause for this was seen in the large number of applicants. Second, it frames the subject matter as ‘emotive’. This, I imagine, refers to the issue of asylum as being a contentious one, but it is also prophetic of the range of high and deep emotions raised by it.

This introductory statement is followed by the key categorisation, also all too familiar, of ‘authentic’ vs. ‘bogus’ asylum seekers. Except for one participant (number 74), nobody

questioned this divide of asylum seekers into economic migrants and political asylum seekers.

Are they escaping torture or ‘just’ looking for a better life?

7: *I come from a family of asylum seekers, as it were. So I know uhm what seeking asylum is. (1) Ahm (2), there are many different views at the moment in the UK and in the UK it might be most people think of asylum seekers as (1) uhm economic migrants (2) which to, in many cases is right. I mean, there are, ahm, a large percentage who are economic migrants (1), but there are also a lot of actual asylum seekers as (1) my family were ahm coming from that background.*

Bruna: Could you define the difference (.) between those two terms. That would be very helpful.

7: *Um, economic migrants are >people who are coming here just to< get a better way of life. [Bruna: Okay] Ahm, in, (1) by a better way of life, in that their lives are not (1) threatened as such ah in their homeland, but what (2) they are trying to do is actually make money ah for themselves and their (1), and their families. So but in another way you can say they are (1) >asylum seekers< of, (1) ahm (2), economy (2) because many countries where they are escaping from because of the, (1) uhm their government’s, (1) ahm, er, (2) their government’s inability to govern (1) efficiently and properly. Er, a lot of people are actually escaping from, (1) er, the tragedy that is their governments (1), whereas (.) the asylum seekers at, or non-immigrants are subject to potential torture >for views< they have expressed in their own countries (1) or religions they have espoused (2) ah or other beliefs they have espoused.*

According to this construction, which is reiterated several times throughout the group discussion, the ‘real’ asylum seekers are those who escape from threat of torture for views and beliefs prohibited in their home country.

In opposition to this group are the ‘economic migrants’ who come here **‘just’** to get a better way of life; to “actually make more money” This is contextualised by the acknowledgement that their governments are unable to govern.

The statement is crucial both in terms of content – most of the following interventions made some reference to this – and strategically, in that the speaker claims a privileged status for himself because he comes from a family of ‘real’ refugees, whilst, at the same time, not owning the marginalised status immediately. It is hard to know how much this affected what was subsequently said or not, in Billig’s terms, dialogically repressed. Some speakers, though, make reference to this, commenting that it brought the refugee into the room in a way that made them feel uncomfortable. This already suggests a preference for keeping the refugee ‘out there’, as a topic of discussion, as a theoretical/political issue, as a faraway subject both materially and psycho-socially.

In terms of the content of the definition, the speaker is introducing a differentiation between a humanitarian discourse (to which the real refugee belongs) and a socio-economic discourse (for the economic migrants) which is just about bettering oneself and therefore indulgent. This differentiation, as Verkuyten (2005) points out, is hardly new.

But even though it has been around for some time and, for example in the case of the Netherlands, sometimes ratified in official documents (Griffhorts, 2000), this distinction has become more pronounced in recent years in the media, political debates, and in everyday conversations. This proposed ‘neat’ differentiation, although appealing for reasons to be explored later, is not left unchallenged.

They are sufferers and suffering is political

74: Er, I'm 74. I just don't think it's as tidy as that. (3) I don't think it's as tidy as that. If you were to take the example of Zimbabwe just now, you'll have people who sought asylum because they've been tortured by Mugabe's forces (1) and then you have everybody else who's suffering in Zimbabwe because of the political state of the country. Do you have to show your metal (1) by having (1) undergone torture to come and claim asylum here or is it enough just to live in a country that's going down the tubes and you watch your kids starve because (.) that's a form of suffering as well, and it's political suffering. So I just don't think it's as tidy and as clean as that. And I personally don't draw such an easy distinction between the economic migrant and the political asylum seeker.

By re-defining ‘economic migrancy’ as ‘political’ and ‘emotional’, participant 74 blurs the boundaries again. Interestingly, what is happening around discursive borders seems to mirror what happens at state borders as well as around psycho-emotional borders in the merging of the social and the psyche. The battle is still around who is let in legitimately, who is left out and who manages to slip in. The way No. 74 discursively allows them all in is by upping the stakes through a redefinition of causality. In contrast to the previous speaker’s attribution of intentionality as ‘wanting to make more money’, P.74 claims that ‘economic migrants’ are trying to avoid seeing “their children starve”. The political component which was played down by n.7 is now reframed: the fairly mild accusation of “inability to govern” is now blamed for making the country “go down the tubes”. Hence the whole issue of asylum, economic and not, is political. And insofar as it is suffering, it is emotional.

Despite this powerful piece of rhetoric, the neat differentiation is not easily let go of, as we can see from the following intervention from a different participant (57) who resists any blurring of boundaries and firmly reinstates the differentiation between ‘genuine’ and ‘bogus’ asylum seeker, i.e. economic migrant. He also brushes off any potential sympathy.

They are just taking their chances

57: Fifty-seven. I think uh asylum should be a Human Right, but because lately it has been misused so much `hhhh that we have lost the meaning of it (1) and most of the people who are coming, as my friend said, that they are economic migrants. The governments are (.) doing their best, but I think it is too much a problem all over the world because majority of the world population is (.) below normal economically and they will try to improve their `hhhh life and come to the countries which can afford a better (.) living. [Bruna: Hm.] And therefore (1), people are

losing their sympathy with asylums, (.) asylum seekers because we can not differentiate who is really a sufferer or who is a mi-, a economic migrant. [Bruna: Hm] ‘hhhh And certain political situation in certain countries are such that they become fed up with their system and want to save themselves and come to the stable countries ‘hhhh and (.) before the first wo-, second world war, I mean we knew who were the asylum seekers who were ‘hhhh refugees and who were really suffering in the hands of tyrants, ‘hhhh but today we don’t know. We, we are just seeking (?) in the ‘hhhh person’s, ‘hhhh, er, demand, what he wants (.) and sometimes we (.) get confused with the word (.) asylum (.) and migrant, economic migrant.

Bruna: ‘hhhh Could you say a little bit more about what differentiates, why is it easier, was it easier after the second World War?

57: Before, because we knew at that time that the world was stable except the war and we knew which were the communities who was really suffering from, er, er, their own bad country and we allowed them, I mean, thinking about the Western world, ‘hhhh America took, er, people and England took so many people from Germany because of that that they were really suffering and they will suffer, but today we do not know the person who comes to the airport, there’s the passport and say I am seeking asylum. ‘hhhh I mean it is very difficult for the host country to go into his details and find it out whether he’s being persecuted or whether he’s come (.) just to take his chance.

This is a very long and complex narrative, but a crucial one as it brings together many themes that have begun to appear and continue to be mentioned in later quotes.

One immediately visible thread is the re-instating of the original categorisation between real and bogus refugee. The difference, however, is that whilst the previous two narratives used a socio-economic versus a humanitarian discourse which constructed the refugee as real asylum seeker/sufferer or economic migrant, this contribution constructs the refugee as exploiting the confused state of the world and people’s capacity for sympathy for their own benefit. Thus, the refugee is manipulating our good will and actually damaging the real asylum seekers. The speaker starts quite ominously by saying that asylum “should be a Human Right”, implying that, for some reason, this decision is suspended. He then, through the use of an extreme case formulation, begins to set the scene. It is ‘much a problem all over the world’, thus pre-emptying any potential accusation that Britain (and from the later reference to England and America as historically having done the ‘right thing’) might be behaving problematically. The problem, participant 57 states, is not with the governments – who are “doing their best”- nor with people who are “losing their sympathy with asylum seekers because we cannot differentiate between who is really a sufferer and who is an economic migrant”. The problem is firmly with the economic migrant who is agentic in this new postmodern world where stability is not a given and we cannot label good and bad countries so easily.

This quote contains two very important points. The first point, achieved through a ‘realistic’ rhetorical move, seems to take on board world inequality, but only in so far as it implicitly supports the claim that we are in danger of being swamped by the “majority of the world population which is below normal economically”. Therefore unequal access to resources is constructed as a fact, with the ‘have-nots’ trying – understandably but

nevertheless problematically for us – to change their status. The second point, as direct consequence of this construction, is that the ‘bogus’ asylum seekers are not only damaging us, but also the genuine refugees (here defined as those “really suffering in the hands of tyrants”). This introduces an interesting twist in the narrative because now the ‘genuine’ refugees are sufferers in the hands of the ‘bogus’ refugees who, for all intents and purposes, are taking away what is their due. Also interesting is the shift of emotions. The guilt does not belong to Governments, nor to us, ordinary citizens, who would like to help and be sympathetic, but *sometimes we (.) get confused with the word (.) asylum (.) and migrant, economic migrant.*

Staying with the emotions a little longer, it is important to point out how one of the things at stake here is who can claim the status of sufferer. It seems that, as long as the refugee is after a better economic status, s/he cannot make a claim on suffering. This is exactly what No.74 successfully questioned and that is now taken away again. As this is removed, so are we allowed to remove our feelings from the economic migrants, and thus there can be splitting between materiality and emotionality.

The issue of confusion comes up time and time again and is worth exploring further. The speaker, several times in his contribution, laments a state of confusion over who is a real refugee, claiming that this is a new phenomenon, whilst during the 2nd World War, “*we knew who were the asylum seekers who were ‘hhhh refugees and who were really suffering in the hands of tyrants, ‘hhhh but today we don’t know.*” He laments the loss of a paradoxical world that was “*stable except the war*”. In the rest of his speech he hints at the loss of a stable identity and certainty about who was who, while now we have to resort to some kind of psychological detective work to find out the applicant real intentions. This is profoundly emotional also in so far as there is the loss of a (fantasized) orderly and uncomplicated world, where it is possible to have no doubts about who is the victim and who the persecutor. For this participant, the refugee represents that loss, in its refusal to be identified, once and for all, as good or bad.

Frosh (2006) claims that nation states are explicitly feeding on racist sensitivities in order to mark out their own boundaries and how this is partly in response to migrancy and the multitude of refugee crises. “The postmodern polyphony of voices and cultures in this arena seems not to be resulting in celebratory enjoyment, but rather to be provoking a counter-revolution in which what is sought is safety in mythical but nonetheless concrete boundaries from which otherness can be excluded and denounced.” (Frosh, 2006:260)

Lousada (2006) is also interested in nationalism and its connection with the fascist state of mind. He claims that nationalism is not a constant preoccupation but a response to anxiety, “an assumed place of safety in times of fear” (pg.103). Nationalism invokes an idealised time when the nation had a given-ness, a fixedness. This is resonant with what the participant is saying, although he does not talk about his nation in specific, but about the world at a time when it was ‘stable except the war’. One could therefore suggest that this participant and the others who make similar claims are anxious. This is clearly confirmed later when participants openly express anxieties, whether experienced by themselves or attributed to others. But in this passage I don’t read as much anxiety as desire for a state of clear certainty; a world clearly and recognisably split between good and bad. This is a state of mind that, whether caused by anxiety or not, dislikes ambiguity and complexity.

To such an extent that even war is preferable; at least that makes the world stable. In this way, such an oxymoron begins to make sense. In war nations, communities, people take sides. The world is neatly divided between enemies and allies. Despite the terrible cost, this conflictual state is paradoxically stable due to its rigidity; one can trust and preserve the good because the bad is kept out, on the other side. This is what Klein's paranoid-schizoid defensive position describes so powerfully.

In the context of this focus group, it seems to provide an alternative and complementary reading to a discursive one of what could be seen as a dance between a rigid, entrenched position on refugees – based on rigid categorisation, ostensibly rational differentiations and justifications for exclusion – and a more openly anxious, benign and empathetic approach.

Refugees are actually very good for Britain....

The following, severely pruned down, extracts are an example of such empathetic approach. As well as providing a more benign and sympathetic image of who the refugee is and feels, these constructions also do some 'emotional work' as they defuse the paranoid, defensive build up of emotions against refugees.

One of the more benign constructions positions the refugee as an 'accidental' victim, as someone who *"didn't actually, ahm, chose to be (politically) involved, they just got caught up"*. These are people, N.82 continues, who *"would quite happily all things being equal, go back home"* and who *"don't want to be here"* and who *"talk wistfully of home and if they could afford to leave uhm and be and, and feel safe which are probably the two basic things, they wouldn't be here. There wouldn't be the asylum problem."*

These constructions are in complete contrast with previous ones of 'flooding' of refugees who want to get into Britain in any way possible. If intentionality is important, as so strongly argued by N.82, this construction deflates the panic by claiming that refugees, given a chance, would not be here but at home. This also deflates intensity of the plea for vigilance and double-guessing.

On very different lines, but equally strongly in terms of deflating the panic and anxiety of the 'flooding' of refugees, participant 57 gives figures to claim that we don't have an asylum problem at all. He argues that *"there's no problem as such as asylum seekers or immigrants. (.) If we see all over the Europe we are short of >two million workers< (1) and since nine ah since the Second World War (.) the population of England (.) has stood at 58 millions and never went up. (1) And we do need people"* With a similar tactic to N.82 of 'turning the argument on its head', participant 57 argues that not only we don't have an asylum problem, but that we actually need refugees and we need more. In this narrative the refugee is helpful and accommodating because *"Asylum seeker comes here, takes the lowest job and feels happy because economically he is well off and does a very good service to the nation."* So, participant 57 argues that *"we all need the workers, we all need the people. We are just come to sixty-two millions. Only 4 million people since nineteen forties";* and adds that *"today, still, whole Europe is crying for people (.) because we are still two million people short"*.

He then, crucially, makes this plea: “*indigenous people, don’t really bother, don’t be worried, your jobs will not be taken*”, *although indigenous is increasingly hard to define*

On very similar lines, participant 32 claims we are “*demonising asylum seekers when on one hand it’s, they’re economic migrants they’re coming over here to take our jobs away, etc. etc. and then on the other hand ah they’re all gonna be benefit cheats. And I’m just trying to figure out how they’re all gonna take our jobs away and be benefit cheats at the same time. (Bruna laughs) Unless they’re actually so poorly paid that they actually need income support. So, (Bruna laughs) sorry, I’ve just had a logical failure there (laughter) of my brain for a second, but it’s just interesting that you can get that kind of misinformation that kind of ah, propaganda in a paper and people actually don’t see the logical break in what’s actually being fed to them*

These are extremely rich statements. It seems a shame to have to rush through them as they do re-dress the balance and show that, despite the tenacity of a negative message in the media, there are many different, much more sympathetic ways in which refugees are perceived. These statements are also important for strategic purposes. The way in which the whole problem is defused and the arguments against refugees shown as rationalisations suggests that the problem might not be rational in the first place. Or at least, it shows that even when the given reasons collapse to rational scrutiny, the heightened level of emotions remains untouched, thus forcing us to wonder about the meaning and the origin of this high level of anxiety.

.... No, they are a serious threat to us.

82: [...] *when you look at uhm, papers like “The Daily Mail”, uhm, whose target audience, well, it, its, its aim and its way to increase the readership almost, is to perpetuate that fear: They’re coming after you, they’re taking our jobs, uhm, they’re going to take over, they’re going to stop English as a real language. It’s all those sort of things that are used as an emotive thing to fuel*

72: *Ahm, and I also wanted to add, I mean, this is perhaps a bit controversial, but (1) [Bruna: Good!] (72 laughs) I’ve always, I’ve always thought that in many ways, ahm, my personal, uhm, feelings, about this are very privileged feelings in the sense that it’s all very well for me to say it’s wrong and people who are being tortured and people who are being persecuted have a right to be here, ahm, which is without doubt what I do feel, but then again my livelihood is not being in any way, shape or form threatened by that, ‘hhhh my community is not necessarily being changed, I don’t feel like it’s being overrun, I don’t feel like my jobs are being taken away, ‘hhhh I don’t feel like my rights to health or my rights to benefits or any of that. So, I think that probably it’s quite a privilege in middle class*

These two statements are very interesting because of the discursive and emotional work they perform. In terms of content, albeit obliquely, they re-assert that refugees are a threat: they are going to take our jobs away, they are a threat to our rights and entitlements, and to a sense of belonging because British identity itself is threatened by them. But in the

context of the powerful piece of rhetoric performed in the previous extracts, particularly by participant 32, to reinstate the idea and own up to the belief that refugees are a threat, would amount to declaring oneself irrational, paranoid and misinformed. It is then not surprising that these beliefs and feelings are disowned by the speakers but attributed to the manipulative media or to less enlightened others. This is a very good example of what Billig (1997a) calls a ‘discursive projection’, a term he used to describe how the belief in the impossibility of a non-white monarchy (Billig 1997b) was attributed to others – ‘public opinion’ or an amorphous ‘them’. “In this way, the speakers were distancing themselves from the racist practices, which they were tacitly supporting but attributing to others” (Billig 1997a:154). This, he claims, is a good example of how repression is dialogically and socially constructed. In the case of the two extracts above, the participants are indirectly acknowledging the local moral order in the group discussion by simultaneously acknowledging and disavowing that refugees are a threat. This is a necessary move since the voicing of a more benign view of refugees has fixed the contextual boundaries of what is morally acceptable to say.

However, I also interpret the stubbornness in which these constructs of threat pop up as the sign that something crucial hasn’t satisfactorily been dealt with. Billig links the dialogic unconscious and its repressions with Freud’s ‘parapraxes of everyday life’ as interruptions of social order. “The moral codes constrain; their structures inhibit; but they do not totally dominate. Their intricacy of restraint can be read as a sign that the temptation to immorality stalks the practice of conversational morality, awaiting the opportunity to colonize vacated spaces” (1997a: 149)

So, what is repressed, rationalised but barely contained emotionally? The quote below says it clearly: the refugees are the ‘other’ coming to live next door to us.

60: I agree it’s easy to sit (.) in my little ivory tower and, and, and think, you know, I want to help, but I, you know, I don’t understand] (1) some of my neighbours’ lives or, (.) you know, and their attitudes and I can’t, (1) it’s difficult to, to sort of, you know, take it on. It’s very emotive. (1)

59: [...] it has become a very trendy issue. ‘hhhh It’s what, we all like to be >green and think about the whales and the oceans and the environment [Bruna: Hm!] and not to wear furs and< [Bruna: Hm!] these issues are very trendy now, whereas how many of us would really like to have certain (.) type of people living next door to us because they are asylum seekers or most of us would like to have, you know, be surrounded by our own type of people and then actually not deal with this issue. (.) So having immigrants is: do we really want to have immigrants here, next to us? Do we want to open the door (.) in the morning and see an asylum seeker, ah, with their different habits and they are not like us, or? So, ah, yeah, it’s, ah, much more emotional. (1)

The dreaded and hated other: psychoanalytic readings

The application of psychoanalytic ideas to the study of racism goes back more than 50 years ago (see for example: Adorno et al. 1950, Fanon 1952, Kovel 1984, Rustin 1991 and

Frosh 2006 for a review of their main ideas) and is extensive. Theories of why we might be afraid and hostile to ‘the other’ are particularly relevant and worth noting.

Frosh (2006) explores how psychoanalysis accounts for “how ‘otherness’ operates in the subjective geography of the racist psyche.” He argues that what is sought after by racism is that “nothing unfamiliar and ‘other’ should survive” (pg. 260) He refers to Rustin’s focus on the irrational mental processes involved in racism and his Kleinian reading of these as unconscious mechanism for warding off anxiety, whereby intolerable, unrecognised emotions are split off and projected into the other, who is then hated and rejected.

Frosh (2006) remarks:

The paranoid nature of racist thinking is apparent in conspiracy theories and fantasies of being flooded by waves of immigration, or of being infected by immigration-borne diseases, or poisoned by alien foods and culture. Moreover, this paranoia is given by the *structure* of the thinking process at work here: it is not primary a cognitive procedure, aimed at finding out about the world, but an emotional one, aiming to expel certain feelings and fantasies from the self, evacuating them ‘into’ the denigrated other “ (p. 261)

The limitation of using models like Rustin’s is in its inherent individualistic nature, albeit extended to group modalities. His argument that if racists could tolerate the world as it is, or at least the self as it has become, they would not need to find denigrated objects onto whom to dump all their internal mess (Rustin in Frosh 2006: 263), takes us back to a more traditional idea of individuals and societies as agglomerate of them. In that sense it does not take into account the variability of individual responses, nor the cultural historical specificity of why, when and how a racist response becomes more active.

Julian Lousada’s (2006) idea of ‘valency’ goes some way in addressing this in his exploration of the connection between fear and hatred of stranger and the fascist state of mind. He argues that, although the two are related and in a necessary relation in which one can recruit the other, it does not mean they are characterologically the same. Because he describes this tendency as a ‘valency’, which is available to be mobilised, the crucial question then becomes “What are the social and psychic conditions that lead the valency to become in an active relationship with the fascist state of mind?” (Lousada 2006: 99) He also uses Kleinian theory to theorise this state of mind as having little curiosity about the object, little capacity to allow for difference, or to tolerate the unknown (Lousada, 2006:100). Lousada argues that the toxicity of this fascist state of mind is precisely due to it being unavailable to doubt and guilt. He further claims that it is misleading and dangerous to consider this fascist state of mind an aberration. If it were so, social and psychological interventions could be deployed to contain it. Instead, he suggests, “under circumstances of heightened anxieties it can recruit seemingly effortlessly the universal apathy towards the stranger and for a while the one state of mind merges with the other” (Lousada 2006: 100)

The problem with this compelling theory is that it is solipsistic in that the aggression towards the stranger is theorised simultaneously as universal and one of the fundamental

foundation blocks on which the fascist state of mind feeds itself, and the result of it. It also does not really provide a satisfactory explanation for the hatred of stranger; at least not for those who don't fully subscribe to a Kleinian psychology and to her theory of envy and death instinct. This theory is therefore unsatisfactory for those who are not convinced by such deterministic view of human beings and might want to question the claimed universal and inevitable nature of such hatred. It does, however, succeed in capturing the emotional power of these states of mind and how they are ready to break out, given the appropriate psychosocial conditions.

As Frosh (2006) succinctly put it "Reducible neither to the social forces from which it springs, nor to psychological 'givens', racism is a social-psychological complex engendered at the level of social and political relations, but also sustained and experienced deep in the individual psyche." (pg.266)

The challenge, for critical psychologists and clinicians, is therefore not only in being able to produce work that bears both factors in mind and brings them together, but also in being able to use those insights for constructive and effective psycho-social interventions.

In the context of their work with the ill effects of intra-ethnic conflict, Halpern and Weinstein (2004) make some very interesting and relevant comments on the role of empathy in the process of re-humanising the other. They focus, in particular, on the central role played in the re-humanisation of the perceptual shift that occurs when one becomes interested in another's distinct subjective perspective. They refer back to social identity theory (e.g. Tajfel and Turner 1979), according to which all individuals categorise themselves within some social framework and then develop in-group favouritism and out-group exclusion, which in turn can escalate into increased group divergence and, in its most extreme manifestation, into violence and group targeted persecution. Halpern and Weinstein argue that, on similar lines but in the opposite direction, reconciliation must also begin at the level of individual - "neighbour to neighbour, then house to house, and finally, community to community", through a re-humanisation of the other and "for that to occur the 'other' must be invested with qualities that are familiar and accepted" (pg.567). They argue that sympathy is not sufficient, whilst empathy is necessary. This is because, whilst sympathy is about experiencing shared emotions, empathy involves imagining and seeking to understand the perspective of another person. This imaginative inquiry presupposes a sense of the other as a distinct individual (Schwan, 2002).

The presence or absence of such 'imaginative inquiry' was one of the crucial differences between the more defensive and the empathetic accounts generated by the focus group. The defensive quotes contained no reference to or sense of curiosity towards what the refugee might be feeling or what it might be like to be one. Curiosity and empathy were replaced by certainty about their motives, particularly when they were defined as 'economic migrant'. Additionally, the possibility of having to become involved with the other in order to ascertain the validity of their claim for asylum, made some participants uneasy. On the other hand the more empathetic accounts centred on the other's experience, empathising with what it might feel like to be forced to be away from home, but also how a badly paid job might be experienced differently by someone who welcomes the chance to work at all.

Halpern (2001) has identified several components of empathy, but in particular how it involves emotional as well as cognitive openness, and tolerating the ambivalence this might arouse.

The work of empathy is precisely trying to imagine a view of the world that one does not share, and in fact may find it quite difficult to share. Notably, while empathy involves perceiving the other's complex point of view, it does not require accepting the other's views. (Halpern and Weinstein, 2006: 581)

This seems to speak directly to participant 60 and colleagues who refers above, indirectly, to the kind of emotional work involved in taking on somebody else's perspective.

It seems to be important to acknowledge that this emotional work should not be taken for granted and that a climate of antagonism and paranoia fomented by some type of media, militates against it. This does not mean an inevitable fall into a fascist state of mind. Whether distrust and hatred of the other is inevitable part of our biological baggage, or is too painfully evocative of extreme vulnerability, or is a defensive getting rid of unacceptable emotional states is, in this context, irrelevant. What matters is finding ways of recognising the difficult work involved in truly meeting the 'other'. Part of the difficulty is that this work has to take place at many different levels. To begin with, as Lousada reminds us, there has to be a State, with the symbolic function of representing a concern for the other, on behalf of the citizen who has a valency to turn away (2006:103). As for us social scientists, it is important to seek to understand what kind of anxieties are evoked by the other and how these are dealt with; as well as how the other is ideologically constructed, bearing in mind that those constructions might have many different functions. They might be ways of giving legitimation to racist discourses - in Lousada's terms to rationalise a valency towards a fascist state of mind - or to avoid the emotional confrontation altogether or, more benignly, to engage with the dilemmatic task by verbalising difficult emotions, thoughts and fears.

This work cannot be done once and for all. To begin with, these are states of mind potentially ready to erupt with great emotional intensity. It would be naïve to expect that, even in conditions of high desirability with an 'educated' population, this tendency could be easily and totally eliminated. Also, in the same way in which the expression of these states of mind will change and adapt in their choice of specific targets, so new discourse formations will form to warrant, disguise and legitimise them. Social scientists have a crucial contribution to make in recognising and counteracting such psychosocial dynamics and their latest, most acceptable, disguises and manifestations.

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