

Gender Variation in Asylum Experiences in the UK: The Role of Patriarchy and Coping Strategies

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Abstract

Previous work suggests that female asylum seekers and refugees have more constraints on their actions than their male counterparts, as structural forces from the country of origin are reproduced in the host country. This paper explores the use of structuration theory in interpreting the impact of gender upon asylum seeker and refugee experiences in the UK. The experiences of, and coping strategies used by 8 male and 10 female asylum seekers and refugees from two different cities are analysed. Their experiences are examined in relation to different patriarchal forces. In comparison to the males, differences are apparent in the level and types of agency of the female asylum seekers and refugees. Within this study certain types of patriarchy are reproduced in British society particularly at the household level, whilst individuals are also influenced by institutional patriarchy within the wider society. The variation in experiences found here suggests the need for policy to recognise the heterogeneity of these groups, so as to provide the most appropriate support for individuals.

Keywords: asylum, refugees, gender, coping strategies, structuration theory

In seeking asylum and adjusting to a new country, asylum seekers and refugees often have to come to terms with, and potentially re-negotiate, complex aspects of their identities. Gender is one feature of their identity which may have a significant impact on their experiences on account of the different social structures between the country of origin and the host country. Previous work suggests that female asylum seekers and refugees have more constraints on their actions than their male counterparts (e.g. Bloch et al., 2000; RWRP, 2003; feminist review special issue, 2003). It is important to understand such distinct gendered experiences from several different perspectives to assist in developing support for individuals upon arrival and as they adjust to their new lives. This paper explores the potential use of structuration theory (Giddens 1984) to offer insights into the gendered experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in the UK. The use of structuration theory within empirical studies has been infrequent (Gregson, 1989); yet it presents an opportunity to analyse the role of patriarchal structures within individual's experiences in a different way.

Context: gender and asylum in the UK

Before exploring the gendered experiences of asylum seekers and refugees, it is important to establish the context of seeking asylum in the UK. The representation of men and women in the UK asylum figures have varied, alongside the ways in which their claims have been dealt with. In 2001 women in the UK claiming asylum in their own right represented only a fifth of the asylum seeking population (RWRP, 2003). It is likely, however, that there are many more women who could seek protection, as worldwide, women, children and the elderly constitute 80% of the total refugee population (CPWR, 2004). Women cannot claim asylum specifically on the basis of their gender. Despite work re-examining the definition of 'refugee' (e.g. Greatbatch, 1989), persecution as a woman remains absent from the grounds for asylum under the United Nations 1951 definition, although how this is interpreted varies from country to country (Crawley, 2001). Women can be exposed to, and experience, the same, and also different types of persecution as men (RWRP, 2003; Freedman, 2009). Women may experience rape, sexual violence, forced sterilisation, genital mutilation, domestic violence, and forced marriage, from which they are unable to get state protection (Mascini & van Bochove, 2009; Freedman, 2009; Asylum Aid, 2002). However, Bloch et al. (2000: 175) argue that the "practice of granting women humanitarian leave to remain, rather than

refugee status, reinforces the view that women and the issues of gender persecution are less deserving of refugee status than the persecution which is experienced by their male counterparts.” Women are often understood as dependent, apolitical, caring, and a part of the family, rather than as asylum seekers or refugees in their own right (Mascini & van Bochove, 2009). Officials also have less awareness of how the gender of applicants “has shaped their experience of persecution” (Asylum Aid, 2002: 1). Therefore some genuine applications from women have a risk of failing due to a lack of understanding. In the UK, the Refugee Women’s Legal Group has worked to politicise this situation and actively lobby for the gendered nature of refugee experiences to be taken into account in policy and practice. The government has failed to engage with this in a meaningful way although it has made further progress than some other EU nations (Freedman, 2009). Some of the experiences of women asylum seekers are accepted in the UK as evidence of persecution of a specific social group (Crawley, 2001). This has led some women to be granted asylum on the basis of the extreme acts of violence they have experienced (for example, female genital mutilation and rape) (Crawley, 2001). These factors underlie the gendered experiences of individuals.

In relation to their experiences of the asylum process, men and women have also been shown to have different experiences in ‘choosing’ to seek asylum and their subsequent resettlement. Women may have less self-determination than men over the choice of their destination country or even, in some cases, the choice to leave their country of origin (Day & White, 2002). In their study of Bosnian and Somali refugees, Day & White (2002: 20) found that few women “displayed evidence of being in charge of their own destinies,” and that it was generally male “family members taking control and dealing with officialdom for them.” Although previous literature has investigated whether individuals had a choice in where they sought asylum (Koser, 2000; Robinson & Segrott, 2002), little reference has been given to the gendered nature of choice. It is important to acknowledge that the nature of ‘choice’ has implications for the experience of individuals in the host country. Bloch et al. (2000: 177) comment how “cultural norms and host society policies influence the resettlement of refugee women.” These experiences are in the context of the wider society’s response towards asylum seekers and refugees, as Vicsek, Keszi & Márkus (2008) have demonstrated in Hungary. Over time, in the UK, it is possible that female asylum seekers and refugees may gain greater agency than they had upon arrival. However, women may remain more socially isolated than men (Bloch, 1997). Refugees implement coping strategies as attempts to establish a level of comfort in the receiving country. A distinction can be made between external and internal coping strategies. Internalised strategies are accomplished through internal beliefs inherent to the individual; they are ways of thinking about and seeing the world, for example, a positive attitude towards their situation. Whereas externalised strategies are ways of dealing with situations through external actions, for example, seeking further training. External actions such as taking language classes, may involve other people which provide the individual with support to negotiate the patriarchal structures encountered. As a consequence of the reproduction of structures from the country of origin, alongside different patriarchal structures in the host society, the type of strategies people utilise may be influenced by the gender of the person involved.

Methods

This paper draws on a wider project investigating the ‘choice’ and experiences of a group of asylum seekers and refugees in the UK. Healey (2006) provides an indepth discussion of structuration theory and the way in which it might support an understanding of the variety of choices and experiences of asylum seekers and refugees. The current paper focuses upon variety of experiences of asylum seekers and refugees by gender. The focal point is the specific structure of patriarchy and the differences in the coping strategies adopted by the men and women interviewed. In seeking to

investigate an assortment of different individual experiences, contacts were established in two contrasting cities in the UK: Gloucester and Sheffield. The interviews were conducted in the summer of 2003 with eight males and ten females, none of whom were related to one another⁴. They consisted of twelve refugees and six asylum seekers. To draw upon a range of behaviours participants were chosen from two refugee support centres: one with clients from a range of countries including Poland, Somalia, Kenya and Eritrea, and one centre which focused on supporting only individuals from the Yemen (see Table I for list of interviewees). Semi-structured interviews were used to enable interviewees to express their own opinions, experiences, aspirations and feelings (Hoggart et al., 2002).

INSERT TABLE I

All but one of the male interviews and seven out of ten of the female interviews were carried out in English; in the remaining, interpreters were used. These were generally friends of the participants, often people who had previously been interviewed. The use of friends to act as interpreters enabled the interviewees to feel more comfortable with the process: however, this may have affected the dialogue either through incorrect or tainted interpretation, or the influence of the interpreter on the participant. The interviews were analysed through a structuration lens looking for the ways in which structure and agency worked within the lives of individuals. The quotes selected here represent the general and specific experiences of those individuals. Due to limited space, the level of detail given about each interviewee, and to contextualise points, is limited, so that some answers may appear too straightforward. In order to avoid the danger of over interpreting, points have been analysed within the context of the interview as a whole. It is acknowledged that the appearance of simplicity may result from the limited English skills of the participants and an inability to express the complexity of situations. Pseudonyms were used when the interviews were transcribed to preserve the anonymity of the respondents. Table I indicates the interviewee backgrounds.

Gloucester has a population of around 100,000 people, whereas Sheffield has a population of just over 500,000. Both cities have a similar proportion of asylum seekers at around 0.3% of the population. However, a consequence of the difference in the size of the cities is the type of refugee support provided. The Gloucester centre was the only one in the city and therefore catered for all asylum seekers and refugees in the area. The nature of this limited the national specific resources available to clients. In contrast, the centre in Sheffield catered specifically for Yemeni nationals. By working with one national group only, the centre was a more attractive option to individuals who wanted to maintain relationships with other Yemenis, thus consolidating the ethnic community. These individuals illustrate the experiences of refugees going to a centre based around nationality. Table II compares the facilities offered by the centres.

INSERT TABLE II

Gender variations in asylum experiences: a structuration framework

In analysing the role of patriarchy and coping strategies of individuals, structuration theory potentially offers a way to further comprehend the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees. Structuration theory has enhanced understanding of the migrant experience in several cases (e.g. Goss and Lindquist, 1995; Halfacree, 1995; Wolfel, 2005). However, although structuration theory has been used to analyse migrants who choose to leave their country of origin, the potential for insight into forced migrants, with a few exceptions (see Healey, 2006), is less established. The potential role of structuration theory for understanding patriarchy in the lives of asylum seekers and refugees has not been addressed; this paper goes some way towards filling this void.

Structuration theory supports an analysis of the structural forces of which asylum seekers and refugees are a part, examining the interactions between structures of patriarchy and the agency of individuals of different genders. Structural forces relate to hegemonic discourses within societies which steer individual or community behaviour. They produce or shape human behaviour as they are implicated in each moment of action, for example, patriarchy is the dominant structural force impacting on gender differences. Human agency is “the ability to act” (Valentine, 2001: 349). The balance between agency and structure influences this ‘ability’ whereby the comparative significance of structure and agency varies in strength in each instance of action. Individuals have diverse responses to the possibilities and restrictions available within societal structures. Structuration theory highlights how structures simultaneously constrain and enable experiences: whereby structure is a part of each moment of action, whilst concurrently actions reflect upon structures. Reflexivity is an aspect of structuration theory.

Reflexivity accentuates how change within the structures of society occurs through human agency. For example, in some communities in Britain, the reproduction of patriarchal relations is produced through agency at a household level rather than as a response to a pre-existing patriarchal structural force in the wider society (e.g. Shaw, 2000). Reflexivity consists of three elements: ontological security, discursive consciousness and practical consciousness (Giddens, 1984). Ontological security is a person’s understanding of their place, within their worldview, in which they feel secure. Forced migration to a new country unsettles this. Individuals have to re-establish a level of ontological security by acquiring knowledge of the structural forces in the host country and the levels of agency they can exert within these structures. Discursive consciousness occurs when a person is able to provide a rational account of their behaviour and the reasons behind it (Giddens, 1984). Discursive consciousness is where an individual has an awareness of their role in producing and reproducing social life. Practical consciousness is a person’s unconscious monitoring of the events taking place around them (Giddens, 1984). This is the unconscious acknowledgment of the social structures and the taken-for-granted nature of the systems of which they are a part. Structural forces such as patriarchy and cultural norms are reproduced through the actions of individuals, influencing the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in their host country.

The framework of structuration theory provides an interesting insight into the underlying taken-for-granted aspects of peoples’ experiences. However, the theory is not formulaic, each respondent is an individual; hence this research is not representative of wider asylum communities, but rather indicates the gender variation within a heterogenic group. The following sections examine these features through the analysis of empirical data; for clarity the analysis is divided into structure and agency, though it is recognised that this separation is somewhat artificial.

Structure: patriarchal structures

Patriarchy, meaning literally ‘rule of the father’, is a structural aspect of many of the origin societies of the interviewees. Patriarchy is also present in the UK, albeit in a different form. Walby (1990: 21) identifies six patriarchal structures: 1) household: whereby women’s household labour is expropriated by their male cohabitants, and her maintenance is received in exchange for her labour; 2) paid work: in which complex forms of patriarchal closure within waged labour, excludes women and segregates them into the worst, least skilled jobs; 3) the state: the state is systematically biased towards patriarchal interests in policies and actions; 4) violence: male violence against women is systematically condoned and legitimated by the state’s refusal to intervene, except in exceptional circumstances; 5) sexuality: where two features are prominent: compulsory heterosexuality and sexual double standards; and 6) cultural institutions: gender differentiated forms of subjectivity whereby institutions create representations of women within a patriarchal gaze e.g. religion,

education and the media. For women in different situations the degree of patriarchy and the form it takes varies.

INSERT TABLE III

Walby (1990) lists distinctions between private and public patriarchy (Table III). This table is based upon Western cultural ideas of patriarchy and how the structure has changed between the 19th and 20th Centuries. The impact of patriarchy for asylum seekers and refugees in the UK is a complex interaction between both private and public structures, whereby women may experience exclusion in specific areas. Yet, even if their household structures enable them to participate more widely, they are likely to still experience other forms of patriarchy, such as segregation, in the UK. A structuration argument illustrates that patriarchy may lead to women having less power than men due to the way in which resources are allocated. Yet these women still have power within these structures, as agents may always act differently.

In the private sphere, patriarchal structures from the country of origin are most prominent within the women's everyday lives. However in the public realm, patriarchy in the post-migration society is institutionalised within, and reproduced by, the government, such as schools. Patriarchy at a household scale is reproduced by individuals, at the practical conscious level, who are influenced by the patriarchal cultural scripts with which they grew up. As Freedman (2009: 177) points out: "the gendered division of labour and gendered roles adopted within most cultures mean that women's activities will often be different from those of men." This is partly because patriarchy can empower some women as they feel protected from outside influences (Mohanty, 1991). As a consequence, women may have less self-determination in decision-making which affects them, yet feel that they have a higher level of ontological security. For example when asked why she had come to the UK Enya, a Polish refugee, explained that it was her husband who had wanted to seek asylum in the UK. During the conversation it became apparent that her actions were the result of her husband's decisions. Her lack of involvement in the decision to come to the UK suggests that the patriarchal relations she experienced in Poland are being reproduced here. Enya expected her husband to make such decisions due to the nature of their relationship, which appeared to be underlain by household patriarchy. Yet, the familiarity of this relationship, and her past experience of patriarchy as part of her everyday life, is significant in how she views the world. In attempting to regain a sense of security in the UK, such familiarity is comforting. This can be seen in other examples of the experience of individuals who have moved to a new country.

Individuals "renegotiate expectations, behaviours and relationships" (Matsuoka & Sorenson, 1999: 218) in the process of settling into a new country. Male asylum seekers and refugees may experience a re-definition of roles in the receiving country, decreasing their comfort level. Upon arrival, they may experience a loss of identity if they become "unable to fulfil their traditional role as family provider" (Bloch et al., 2000: 176). This is a consequence of three main factors: the asylum system preventing them from working, the 'feminisation of the economy' whereby the availability of jobs deemed to be appropriate male work is limited, and non-economic influences on personal identity such as cultural differences in the host country. This can lead to individuals feeling powerless. The stress of this experience may lead to marital breakdowns, causing further stress to everybody in the family (Harrell-Bond, 1986). The reproduction, consciously or unconsciously, of patriarchal structures at the household level help to consolidate the patriarch's position in the family and enable him to maintain some sense of control in a situation in which he typically lacks command.

As an asylum seeker from Somalia, Yusuf demonstrated a clear awareness of the patriarchal relations dominant within his country of origin. However, this awareness contrasted with his lack of

recognition of similar structures in the UK. He commented how, “once you have reached here it is ... different because everyone is treated equally.” In this comment, Yusuf suggests that he is aware of patriarchy in Somalia. However, he did not recognise that, despite the difference in the types of patriarchy, the inequality continues to exist in the UK. Adil, a journalist and refugee from Eritrea, believed that female arrivals frequently have a lower level of education than their male counterparts.

“Yes, lots of women I know have got less education background. They have difficulty filling in forms... finding a job and systematically worrying about how they are going to make the best out of everything.”

Although his assumption that some women are less educated than men, may be true of the women he knows, his understanding of the reasons behind such differences appear to be based on his view of women as having innately different ways of thinking, for example, he describes them as “systematically worrying”. This conjecture relates to the impact of institutional patriarchy upon his views, whereby he suggests that women behave inherently differently from men and therefore achieve less educationally. This structure is part of his practical consciousness: his attitudes contribute to the reproduction of the structure, whilst he is unaware how patriarchal structures have influenced his own perspective.

Patriarchal relations also influence the agency of individuals seeking asylum. In making his arrangements to come to the UK Abdi believed he had selfdetermination with regard to his destination, considering himself to have greater control than the women he knew.

“You need to be daring. Ladies and men are different. Guys sometimes are normal or aggressive, women are different. Men have to try to support ladies.”

Abdi believed that women needed men to ‘look after’ them. Therefore he appears to consider that women’s sense of security and comfort is brought about through male support. To maintain or increase their ontological security, particularly when applying for asylum, some women may depend on male acquaintances or family members. This may empower the woman through the support that she receives. For example frequently, when seeking asylum, the female application is tied to their husband’s. However, if the marriage subsequently fails, then as the application was in the husband’s name, the female refugee’s status may be in jeopardy (Bloch et al., 2000).

Not all women experience the asylum system in this male dominated way. Sadia was in a position to make her own decision to seek asylum.

“We both wanted to escape because we were both really suffering, and to see my husband in prison, yes, that was really hard, so we both wanted to escape.”

Sadia’s husband was the principle applicant for asylum, but they made the decision to apply together. By being a part of the decision-making process, on arrival in the UK, Sadia had a greater level of agency than some of the other interviewees. She was, however, the only woman interviewed to have such a high level of agency in the decision to seek asylum. Kidan, who came to the UK from Somalia, thought that she was travelling to the USA. She was duped when “the man who was *paying for her trip+ ... disappeared” when they reached Heathrow. Kidan had no control over her destination; she was reliant on the people who trafficked her to the UK. Consequently, Kidan had substantially less selfdetermination in her experience than Sadia. This could be because Sadia, as a lecturer in Burundi and with a more extensive educational background, may be wiser to potential scams than housewife Kidan.

On arrival, in contrast to men's potential loss of agency, women may have more economic options in the receiving country, as fewer patriarchal structures prevent access to the public sphere. However, they may also be expected to fulfil domestic tasks such as childcare with little assistance from their husbands, making it difficult to balance two roles. This negotiation between private and public patriarchal structures may affect women's sense of belonging in the host country. Sadia commented how "childcare is really a nightmare here because you can't work, you can't study, because you don't get childcare." For Sadia, her husband was relatively supportive of her desire to work, but due to the demands from his own employment, he did not take up the role of caretaker for their son. The absence of extended family to support childcare in asylum emphasises how the responsibility for children lies predominantly with women. Exerting their agency some women may challenge this and employ others to care for their children, yet this may go against strongly ingrained cultural norms.

The comments and actions of the interviewees represent certain understandings of the world. The structure of patriarchy is rarely disputed, and although recognised by some in their country of origin, it is not acknowledged in the same way within the host country. The female experience here is affected by patriarchal structures and expected familial roles. However, the intention is not to suggest that these women are victims of the societal structures, with the potential danger of cultural reductionism, but to illustrate how men and women recognise structures of patriarchy differently and how this subsequently affects their experiences.

Human agents are complex and do not just respond to the stimuli of structural forces (Giddens, 1984). They have "stocks of knowledge" formed through the continuous observation of their activities (Schutz, 1972). The knowledge individuals have relates to their experiences in their country of origin. In countries with strong patriarchal structures these stocks of knowledge are more limited. It is through this knowledge that people rationalise their actions. No action is taken in isolation from the rest of the person's life (Gutting, 1996). If the social structure is one of patriarchal relations then the individual's decisions are based within this understanding of the world. This may maintain a sense of comfort, yet active agency may also increase ontological security through the development of coping strategies.

Agency: coping strategies

Agency is powerful; people always have the potential to act otherwise (Giddens, 1984). Individuals are socialised into placing the systems and structures of society before their agency, as their actions have wider societal consequences. Individuals who grew up with certain patriarchal structures may accept such limitations, to the extent that they do not dispute them. Structure is therefore a significant tool for explaining actions, providing a basis for understanding the social worlds impacting upon individuals. However structures are not autonomous, they are maintained by individuals who reconstruct them through their actions (Sarre, 1986). People who abide by patriarchal structures consequently reproduce these structures by living them. They therefore have agency within dominant structures. Coping strategies are a way of regaining a level of comfort in the host societies (ontological security). The variation in gendered experience leads to the use of different coping strategies.

As a coping method, an asylum seeker might get involved in volunteering in order to utilise their time whilst they are prohibited from seeking paid employment (Volunteering and Asylum Project, 2004). This could help them adjust to differences in social structure and develop a positive attitude by feeling involved in the host society. Another option for many people is to take language classes. However, as Bloch et al. (2000: 179) argue "women's access to language classes and other forms of training may be severely curtailed due to childcare responsibilities and practices such as female

seclusion.” This gender dimension may limit female access to externalised coping strategies. In research in the London borough of Newham, Bloch (1997) found that the gender differentiation in language problems was maintained over time, where women arrived with less proficient English than their male counterparts. Such classes are a way of dealing with situations through external actions to regain agency. Males may have more opportunities to use these strategies than females. Externalised coping strategies are, however, often linked to internalised coping strategies; the attitude of a person spurs them on to seek a greater comfort level in the host country through active coping methods.

Internalised coping strategies, are particularly connected with ontological security as they contribute to a person’s perception of their position within their world view. There is little research specifically on internal strategies; examples in the literature rarely describe behaviour in such terms. Monzel (1993) discusses the way in which Hmong women, in Syracuse, USA, dealt with their experiences. One of her interviewees, Kue, remarked how she “lived only one day at a time” (Monzel, 1993: 16). This strategy of concentrating on the here and now helped her cope, as the uncertain future was potentially distressing. Another survey found that eight out of ten female asylum seekers locked themselves in their homes by early evening (Casciani, 2002). This reaction appears to be a fear of their new situation; to cope, the women blocked out the external world at times of particular vulnerability. Females may be forced to adopt internal coping strategies that do not progress to external strategies. This creates fewer opportunities for them to be involved in the host society than their male counterparts.

Internalised coping strategies are beliefs intrinsic to the individual which shape how they see and think about the world. Both male and female interviewees utilised internal coping strategies. Faisali, an Algerian refugee, living in Gloucester discussed how he coped with “friends” by remaining detached:

“I have some friends here, they go out sometimes, usually I don’t go because I don’t want to get too attached, I might feel something for them.”

Faisali had experienced rejection since arriving; therefore he was hesitant about becoming close to people. Internally he decided to remain apart from his new friends, so as to limit his chances of being rejected again. However, such a strategy has negative consequences. Through isolating himself, Faisali limits his involvement with the host community, extending the length of time it would take for him to regain the same level of comfort he had in Algeria, if at all.

Maryon, Enya and Meriton all had positive attitudes and intentions. They all talked of how they would like, and intended, to learn English. This plan acted as a coping strategy for these women; the idea that they could do something to improve their experiences in the UK. However, although, they had all been in the UK for at least 6 months, it was only Maryon who had moved from an internal hope of learning English to actually going to classes. Internalised strategies are ways of thinking that can lead to the adoption of externalised strategies. Maryon’s intention had moved into action whereby she was studying once a week at the refugee centre in Sheffield in a women-only class. This class was put in place specifically for women from the Yemen. With these connections it was perhaps easier for Maryon to move from internal to external strategies, than for Meriton and Enya, living in Gloucester, where there were no women only groups. Despite access to the women’s group some of the Yemeni women still chose to learn English at home.

“In my spare time I like to stay at home, follow the English channel [pause] sometimes I write down words and translate them. Sometimes if I have a party or wedding I go, but I like to stay at home, to do anything to improve my English” (Biana).

Biana wished to emphasise how English was a priority for her, yet although she had contacts with the refugee support centre in Sheffield (this was where she was interviewed), she did not talk directly about the opportunity to learn English there. This was in contrast to many of the males interviewed who had some background in English before arriving, and/or had sought to learn English in formal classes available from local colleges. Fasaili commented how he “couldn’t speak English, back home I had three years college, but I didn’t learn that much.” As a man in Algeria, Fasaili had been given the opportunity to access some English education in his country of origin. This basis of knowledge perhaps gave him some comfort when he first arrived in the UK, and made a college course in English less daunting.

This distinction between the male and female experiences of seeking English education is significant. In this group of people, the women were learning English at home on their own or via women only voluntary classes run out of the refugee support centre, whereas the men were attending formal tuition at the local college. This raises interesting insights into the effect of patriarchal forces in the public realm. The presence of the female space in Sheffield empowered some of the women to action their intentions by taking English lessons. However, as the female courses run in Sheffield, were on a voluntary basis with limited resources, the English skills of the participants were generally lower than the males interviewed. This highlights an interesting complexity to the nature of acceptable ‘public’ space within the patriarchal structures. To learn English effectively requires attending classes which are held in public spaces, rather than in isolation at home. In the Sheffield refugee support centre, the public space was made semi-private by making it only available to women, hence overcoming some of the patriarchal barriers. Yet in producing this semi-private space, the formality of the lessons decreased, reducing the quality of the education the women were receiving relative to the men who had been taught in a formal college environment. This has two significant effects on the contact women have with wider society: firstly, the women were not mixing with a variety of people via their English classes, and secondly, their level of English was lower due to the poorer standard of education they were receiving, further limiting their opportunity for contact with the wider society in the future.

Religion offers an internal coping strategy for some. In this study the interviewees mentioned the support of their religious beliefs since they had arrived. For some of the Muslim participants, a gender variation was identified in the way religion acted as a coping strategy. Yusuf commented:

“Well I’m not very religious... I didn’t go to get help from them anyway, but yeah – they are ok, they normally just see you on the way and say ‘Hi’.”

In contrast to Yusuf, the female Muslims in Gloucester did not have access to the mosque, as is the norm in Islamic societies, therefore whereas male Muslim beliefs also provided a meeting point and social contact, female Muslims were more likely to worship at home in isolation.

This is another example of the private-public distinctions in the availability of coping strategies for these men and women. Women’s coping revolved around more private spaces, whereas men had access to both private and public opportunities to support their settlement. Although somewhat dismissed by Yusuf, the contact with the mosque provides him with a source of hospitality which the females in the same city lacked. Internally these women may use their religious beliefs or attitudes in order to cope. However, as illustrated here, they have been unable to transform these perspectives into external strategies. This, in itself, is an effect of the dominance of the production and reproduction of the patriarchal structures within the religious institution.

The refugee support centres also provided options for utilising external strategies. For everyone, the use of organisational advice and support meant visiting the centre. In Gloucester the centre was

used by both men and women, but it was frequented much more regularly by men and children for social activities, such as sport facilities or Internet access. Natalya commented that the refugee centre “is a special place ... I come when I need help, otherwise I stay at home.” Natalya was most comfortable in the private realm of her home. Her construction of the refugee support centre as “a special place” blurs the boundaries between the public-private distinctions about the centre. The place was significant on account of her feeling more comfortable there. The support of the centre made it familiar and safe, the only place outside of her home that provided the same level of security. They provided Enya with furniture, and helped Meriton complete immigration papers. However, like Natalya, other than seeking help, and English lessons, most of the female interviewees did not use the centres for social activities, limiting social contact and the opportunity to utilise external strategies. Abdi illustrates the support the refugee centres can provide:

“When you come for the first time they give you the clothes and the bedding... then they tell you where you can get solicitors, they help in getting you to the interviews, they provide transport and such things, and occasionally you find one or two people that you can talk to in these facilities.”

Abdi experienced similar support to the female participants; however, by using the centre as a place for social activity, he also found friends. In Sheffield the more formal female-only-sessions of English tuition, and other activities such as needle work, enabled the women to make friends with other women. For both groups the refugee support centres therefore offered spaces which increased the comfort level of the interviewees.

To summarise, and draw the artificial separation between structure and agency together: the coping strategies available to individuals may be constrained by different patriarchal structures. Individuals, who only use internal coping strategies as a consequence of patriarchal constraints, subsequently reproduce these structures. However, if individuals move towards utilising external methods they may be empowered to challenge the patriarchal structures implicated in their daily lives.

Conclusion

The use of the theoretical framework of structuration theory provides some insight into the gendered experiences of the interviewees. However, through using this theoretical framework too much homogeneity can be implied within the research group and therefore the individual voice can be lost. Although limited by space, this has been partly overcome by providing the voice of the interviewees. The theory enables greater analysis of the variation in experiences, but does not represent the individual. Structuration theory has been used explicitly in empirical studies only infrequently previously (Gregson, 1989); but this research shows that the theory offers insights into the effects of different patriarchal structures in relation to varying levels of agency of a group of asylum seeker and refugees.

Due to the nature of this study, generalisations were not intended because of the high diversity within the group in terms of gender, legal status, country of origin and location in the UK. The findings suggest that there is a distinct difference in the level and types of agency of individuals. The research found that different types and varying levels of patriarchy were significant for these asylum seekers and refugees within the UK. However, this does not reflect the complex re-negotiations of gender relations, both positive and negative, that continuously take place within communities and households. This structural force may be particularly significant for female asylum seekers and refugees due to the societal structures of their countries of origin (Freeman, 2009). This supports previous work illustrating the lack of access women have to language classes due to familial responsibilities (e.g. Franz, 2003) and the maintenance of gender difference in language ability after arrival in Britain (e.g. Bloch, 1997). The female experience here was often one of more limited

agency than that of their male counterparts. For example, childcare was shown to remain a female responsibility, due to the patriarchal structures of the countries of origin and institutional patriarchy in the UK.

The coping strategies used in the host country generally varied by gender. Both males and females had some opportunity to use internal and external coping strategies; however in this study the male interview participants made greater use of external strategies than the females. The female participants utilised internal coping strategies due to their limited agency within the host country. Through the utilisation of coping strategies, of either sort, their ontological security increased and therefore so did their level of agency and understanding of their place within the societal structures. This could lead to changes in coping and movement towards external strategies. By living in the UK, it is possible that some of these gender variations may decrease as both women and men adjust to the societal structures. The use of external coping strategies lead to higher levels of ontological security than those adjusting to their new situations using internal methods; as through external actions people engage with the societal structures and the host community. However, the opportunities open to the use of external coping strategies vary by gender.

This research has further highlighted the variety of different experiences of individuals (Korad, 2003). Refugees and asylum seekers should not be considered as homogenous groups, they need to be thought of and talked about as individuals. Understanding how patriarchal structures affect individuals differently, how the use of strategies vary by gender, and how the opportunities for the use of external coping strategies vary by the support available in different places, could enable the development of more focused support for the individual. This suggests that there is a need to recognise the heterogeneity of this marginalised section of society in order to achieve greater support for individuals.

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