Journal of Refugee Studies Vol. 31, No. 4 © The Author(s) 2018. Published by Oxford University Press.
All rights reserved. For Permissions, please email: journals.permissions@oup.com
doi:10.1093/jrs/fey007 Advance Access publication 20 February 2018

Talking about the Past, Locating It in the Present: The Second Generation from Refugee Backgrounds Making Sense of Their Parents' Narratives, Narrative Gaps and Silences

ALICE BLOCH

University of Manchester, School of Social Sciences, Manchester, UK
alice.bloch@manchester.ac.uk

MS received June 2017; revised MS received January 2018

This article focuses on intergenerational narratives of exile and persecution as well as the narrative gaps and the silences between generations from the perspectives of the second generation from refugee backgrounds. The article draws on data from interviews with United Kingdom-born adults with parents who had been refugees from Vietnam and Sri Lanka (Tamils) and Kurds from Turkey. While some parents shared pre-migration, flight and post-migration stories, others chose not to talk about the past. There were clear differences between the three heritage groups that related to the displacement contexts and to responses to loss and trauma. Both the stories told and the gaps and silences were made sense of and filtered, by the second generation, through the lens of their lives in the United Kingdom. The second generation developed their own narratives of their parents' pasts, which were embedded in their everyday lives, but also framed around their distinctive heritages.

Keywords: Second generation, narrative, memory, narrative gaps, silences, intergenerational transmission, trauma

Introduction

This article focuses on second generation people from refugee backgrounds—that is the United Kingdom-born adult children of refugees from Vietnam, Sri Lanka (Tamils) and Turkey (Kurds)—to explore, from their perspectives, the pre-migration narratives of persecution and displacement handed down inter-generationally as well as the narrative gaps and the silences between generations. Within the European research and scholarship, the second generation from refugee backgrounds are subsumed within the wider analyses of ethnic minority people (see e.g. Crul *et al.* 2012). Consequently, little is

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article-abstract/31/4/647/4883360 by guest on 19 February 2020

known about how growing up within the context of a refugee family may shape experiences and how parents' pre- and post-migration experiences are narrated, understood, filtered and re-narrated by the second generation. Drawing on the observations and insights of the second generation offers a unique opportunity to explore the complex ways in which they interpret their parents' narratives and narrative gaps, how they place their own frame of reference on the stories that they are told, how they make sense of silences and what they perceive as avoidances and how these in turn shape the second generation's identity, their sense of history and their family relationships.

The concept of 'generation' has multiple meanings but is used here in relation to a lineage connection between the parent(s), who are part of the migration generation, and their adult child who, in this study, was born in the country of settlement. Generation in forced migration research is particularly important to understand because of the large numbers of forced migrants and because something of the original trauma will be transmitted between generations (Loizos 2007). Drawing on empirical data, this article considers three linked questions relating to intergenerational narratives. First, what memories are shared about lives prior to migration and about the journey and in what ways do different contexts of displacement affect the stories told and the ways in which they are received and understood by the recipient through the lens of their lives in the United Kingdom? Second, how do context and proximity influence the types of stories that are shared intergenerationally? Third, how do the second generation from refugee backgrounds make sense of silences and narrative gaps? Central themes throughout the analysis are the ways in which narratives are understood and interpreted by the recipients and how loss and trauma can frame the lives of the United Kingdom-born second generation from refugee backgrounds.

Background and Literature

The literature on the intergenerational transmission of memory is broad and inter-disciplinary, and has also been described as post-disciplinary (Hirsch 2008). Family memories are inherited memories and the sharing of stories both excludes and bonds, but is also associated with power—the power to share, to protect, to keep secrets and by the power dynamics between the teller and recipient (Eastmond 2007; Smart 2011). What is remembered and shared at any given time is situational and dependent on the interaction between the person narrating the story and the recipient (Eastmond 2007). Moreover, the stories told are not passively accepted, but are instead reframed and reinterpreted through the lens of life course, age and gender (Sharma 2009; Welzer 2010) as well as the social, cultural and historical facets of community and nation (Granata and Sarcinelli 2012).

Research on memory has its origins in the post-Holocaust era, focusing on the transmission of trauma. More recently, the academic literature on intergenerational transmission of memory and trauma has expanded from the

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article-abstract/31/4/647/4883360 by guest on 19 February 2020

post-Holocaust context to other exile and displacement contexts (Sangalang and Vang 2017). The focus is often on one heritage group rather than a more comparative cross-group analysis. The specificity of pre-migration contexts is significant because is it can impact on the trauma experienced, the types of narrative told and the content of the narrative itself as well as the propensity for avoiding narratives to suppress or forget (Lewis 2008; Puvimanasinghe *et al.* 2014). Trauma associated with war and armed conflict includes both direct experiences of violence and persecution as well as being a witness to such acts. Trauma can also include the death of and separation from family members (Dalgaard and Montgomery 2015). While the second generation have not actually witnessed the trauma, they experience postmemory (Hirsch 2008)—a concept that conveys the impact of transmission on the recipient that can be so powerful that they '*seem* to constitute memories in their own right' (Hirsch 2008: 107)'. Trauma, in the form of postmemory, is passed on through narratives and behaviour and so transcends silences (Lev-Wiesel 2007: 76).

The telling of stories can have different functions for the teller and for the recipient. For the narrator, they can be a mechanism for dealing with loss and trauma; they can be a way of ensuring that history does not forget and a way of offering children a sense of identity and belonging (Granata and Sarcinelli 2012). For the recipient, the stories told by the refugee generation become part of the process through which the second generation make sense of their parents' histories and are one of the ways in which they locate those histories in their present. Family narratives are fluid, and the past and present become meshed (Smart 2011). Although memories themselves are individual, the founding stories of who we are and where we came from are passed on in narratives, rituals and ceremonies and confer membership or exclusion to the group or nation and shape both individual and collective identity (Eyerman 2004).

For the second generation, who have been born in the United Kingdom, there can be a keen interest, almost a hunger for the narratives that can help them to make sense of their pasts, their present and possible futures. Disclosures connect the ways in which stories are shared and memories are created and adapted, but secrets and silences play an important part of family narratives too (Smart 2011; Ali 2012). Hirsch and Spitzer (2009) note how silences, in the testimonies of Holocaust survivors during the Eichmann trial and the filming of Lanzmann's Shoah, could be more powerful than spoken words. Silences and muteness have different functions, being a response to the unspeakable, but also a protective strategy (Dalgaard and Montgomery 2015). Moreover, between generations, there can be a non-verbal agreement not to speak of traumatic experiences, keeping them separate from the everyday (Wiseman *et al.* 2006). A 'double wall of silence' can emerge and be maintained across generations through a set of learned and adhered to rules where family members understand the signs of distress and know not to pursue questions, and the parents shut down attempts at a dialogue (Frankish and Bradbury 2012).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article-abstract/31/4/647/4883360 by guest on 19 February 2020

The second generation who grow up in close and intimate proximity to survivors do not inherit the experience, 'but its shadows' (Hoffman 2010). Reflecting on her own biography as the child of Holocaust survivors, Hoffman (2004) notes that, even in the absence of intergenerational narratives, the past is not erased because it always broke through in the disturbance of nightmares, though illness and aches, and through sighs and tears. These non-verbal expressions of traumatic pasts—screaming in the night, using 'souvenirs of deathworlds' such as objects from Nazi extermination camps—become a normalized part of family life, not discussed but accepted so that the past coexists with the present, becoming intertwined with the everyday world of the children of survivors (Kidron 2009, 2012).

As trauma is always present—whether narrated or not—it becomes embodied in the lives of the second generation and so this article is as much about the telling of the story and the sharing of memory as it is about the silences and the narrative gaps. The comparative element in this research offers insights and reflections on the intersections of the past and present on memory and intergenerational narratives and, in so doing, makes a contribution to the literature by advancing our understanding of the complex intergenerational legacy of refugee backgrounds.

Case Study Groups and Research Design

This section provides context about the generation that arrived as refugees or asylum seekers—the parents of those included in the study—and the research design and data analysis. Those from Vietnam, many of whom were ethnically Chinese, arrived in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s and early 1980s as part of a refugee resettlement programme. On arrival, refugees from Vietnam participated in induction and orientation programmes prior to dispersal around the country. Many were dispersed to areas where they were isolated and had little access to support or economic opportunities and so secondary migration to urban centres with pre-existing Chinese communities was the pattern (Robinson and Hale 1989). Tamils from Sri Lanka who came as asylum seekers during the civil war of 1983–2009 were the next of the three groups to arrive in the United Kingdom. The refugee generation from Sri Lanka were more educated than their counterparts from Vietnam and Turkey. The former colonial connection with the United Kingdom resulted in a high level of English-language proficiency, facilitating upward economic mobility. Kurds from Turkey came to the United Kingdom as asylum seekers from the early 1990s. Interviewees from this group were the youngest. Like their Vietnamese counterparts, some of the generation who came to the United Kingdom as refugees had experienced dangerous journeys and some had relied on smugglers to plan and execute their journeys. Both Tamils and Kurds were discriminated against minorities, and some of the refugee generation had been active in politics both prior to and post migration, which can

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article-abstract/31/4/647/4883360 by guest on 19 February 2020

have a significant impact on the narratives told to children, their identity formation and on ideas of home and nation (Granata and Sarcinelli 2012).

The empirical parts of the article draw on data from 45 semi-structured interviews with the United Kingdom-born adult children of people who had come to the United Kingdom as refugees from Vietnam (15 interviews), Tamils from Sri Lanka (16 interviews) and Kurds from Turkey (14 interviews) and who had spent part or all of their childhoods in London. The final sample comprised 24 women and 21 men. The age range was 18–36. Those from Vietnamese backgrounds were the oldest group, which reflected the earlier arrival of their parents, while Kurds from Turkey were the youngest. The data used in this article formed part of a cross-national project with France and Switzerland (see Bloch *et al.* 2015).

In the absence of a sampling frame for the study population, gatekeepers from community organizations, student societies, local politicians, networks of colleagues, personal contacts and social media (particularly Facebook) were used as starting points to access interviewees and for snowball sampling. The process of making contacts, explaining the research and organizing interviews meant that there had been interactions between the interviewee and the interviewer before the actual interview took place and this helped to build rapport. The use of snowballing and social networks as gatekeepers helped to ensure that trust was built. The interviews were carried out in English. While this was the second language for most interviewees, all had been born and educated in the United Kingdom and were therefore fluent in English. Interviews took place either in cafes, non-governmental organization (NGO) offices, at the home of the interviewee or at the university campus in private staff offices. The interviews lasted around an hour, although a few were shorter and some were longer. All the transcripts were anonymized and pseudonyms applied to individual interviewees. Once the fieldwork was completed, a detailed coding frame was developed based on close and repeat readings of the transcripts. The coding frame was structured using a hierarchical thematic approach suitable for data entry and the subsequent analysis in NVivo.

The wider research project set out to explore experiences of growing up in London in the context of a family where their parents had been or were refugees. The interview included a number or open-ended questions about the social, educational, economic and family life of the interviewee, their wider family and community networks, transnational activities, return visits to the heritage country, identity and belonging. To enable a broader context about interviewees' backgrounds, we asked some questions about their parents' lives before and post-migration. While intergenerational transmission and stories of pre-migration and the journey were not the focus of our interviews, they nevertheless emerged as a significant theme and one that was interviewee-led, not researcher-led. Narratives that emerge spontaneously in interview contexts can result in a process of reflection and contextualization, enabling insights into how people view and understand their world (Eastmond 2007). For example,

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article-abstract/31/4/647/4883360 by guest on 19 February 2020

describing visits back to the parents' country of birth could also lead to recounting the stories told during those visits or insights into parents' pasts and reflections on those in relation to the present. Even the process of participating in the research had, in a few cases, precipitated conversations between interviewees and others. This is similar to Ali's (2012) observations that for some interviewees—in her case her siblings—simply participating in research creates family narratives through which new stories evolve and then become part of the family history.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The remainder of the article presents the empirical data. The first part explores the content of the intergenerational narratives, highlighting how these both vary but also share some similarities between the three heritage groups included in the study. The second section focuses on when and where stories are told, highlighting the significance of context and proximity. The third part explores reflections about and the impacts of narrative gaps and silences. The data clearly demonstrates the role and the impact of intergenerational narratives but also narrative gaps and silences in the lives of those growing up in families where their parents were or had been refugees. Efforts to make sense of the present by understanding the past alongside reflective practices, through the lens of lives in the United Kingdom, were evident among those we interviewed. It is clear in the analysis that the complexity of individuals, family relationships, gender, class, community, nation, trauma, heritage, history, socio-economic status and more means that it is difficult to generalize. Nevertheless, the data analysis does point to clear thematic trends across and within the three groups, which demonstrate the importance of migration contexts on intergenerational narratives.

The Stories Told and the Memories Shared

Those from Tamil and Kurdish backgrounds were more likely to hear stories told spontaneously by their parents or to receive answers to their questions than those from Vietnamese backgrounds. The narratives shared intergenerationally by those from Tamil backgrounds often contained positive recollections about life in Sri Lanka and included memories of family and of community, although they were sometimes related alongside stories of conflict, loss, discrimination and death. This paradox could be difficult to make sense of, as Kaliban explained:

> They would always talk to me about their massive garden and how delicious the mangos would taste there . . . if you're living in Harrow in a semi detached house with a garden that's so tiny, the idea of having a big house with coconut trees and mango trees in the garden is beyond belief. That really captures your imagination as a child. But then also the stories of war also capture your imagination in a less pleasant way. So the stories of people who'd died and yeah for

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article-abstract/31/4/647/4883360 by guest on 19 February 2020

> example my aunt died, she was actually killed by the Tigers. So in lots of ways Jaffna was also in my mind and was associated with a lot of pain and strife. I heard stories of bombings and running into the bunker. It was a weird place then which was like a paradise but also then became a place of terror as well. It was a weird thing growing up and hearing that (Male, Tamil heritage).

In the above quote, Kaliban is not only passing on stories from his parents; he is comparing their life in Sri Lanka with his own experiences of life in West London, but also the things that, in his own words, 'capture your imagination'. Transmission is as much about the sender as the recipient (Granata and Sarcinelli 2012). The sender can and does selectively decide what memories to share. In the interview situation, it was often those stories that might capture the imagination or that were dramatic and even heroic that were related. The sharing of memories is multi-layered and, for this reason, over time, what is remembered and shared evolves but it is also inflected by the contemporary experiences of the teller and the recipient (Sharma 2009; Smart 2011).

Others too noted the juxtaposition of the positive and the negative. In the quote below, Abhimanyu explains the nature of the stories told, as others did too, as being a protective strategy on the part of his parents:

> They were mainly positive. I don't think they wanted me to know about the negative so much, they were just small things they said, but mainly it was about how beautiful Sri Lanka was and stuff. There were negatives like my dad was saying how if you wanted to go to medical school in Jaffna, you had to have a higher pass percentage than the Sinhalese, just because they were a minority. So he told me things like that. But most of what they said was positive.... Like growing food, farming, things like that, things we couldn't do here (Male, Tamil heritage).

Abhimanyu emphasizes the differences between Sri Lanka and London by making comparisons with 'things we couldn't do here'. Such comparisons between past and present are a frame of reference for both the parent and the child. Jane, for example, said that her parents talked about Sri Lanka 'all the time'. When asked to elaborate on what was talked about, she began by saying:

> A lot of stories about growing up: going to the beach, the weather and the food was amazing, small stories about school or teachers, family, their friends, how strict their teachers used to be, the housework and things that were done in the house. They had servants there, so about their lives how they used to live (Female, Tamil heritage).

However, Jane then went on describe how the army would come and do checks in her mother's area and how her father would have been killed if not for an English family who gave him sanctuary. Trauma and discrimination could quickly creep into the stories recounted intergenerationally and so in reality were never far from the surface.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article-abstract/31/4/647/4883360 by guest on 19 February 2020

Among those from Kurdish backgrounds, shared memories were often about negative pre-migration experiences, including state oppression, violence and discrimination and unequal gender relations. The relatively more recent arrival to the United Kingdom of their parents meant that experiences in Turkey were much more immediate and time could impact on what was talked about. When Rodja was asked whether her parents ever talked about the past, her response was as follows:

> Mainly they talk about negative things. Imagine being forced to abandon education, getting forced to marry her first cousin, these tragic stories. My mum still cries that she couldn't have a proper education. Now she goes to college, she still wants to make something of her life. It is hard to hear that she was pulled out of education at 14 and forced to marry. Imposing marriage at 13–14 is utterly wrong. My dad was about 19 (Female, Kurdish heritage).

In the case of Zelat, whose mother had witnessed a massacre, the trauma was kept alive through the narration of the story. Zelat, like Rodja above, also locates herself in her mother's story. Both Zelat and Rodja offer their own frame of reference to make of sense of what happened to their respective mothers:

> My mum lived through a massacre. Thousands of people were murdered, massacred and burned. My mum remembers her neighbours being killed.... She was brought up in a village so when she was 15 or 16 one of the biggest massacres in the whole Alevi history happened and she still remembers it, she wouldn't go back.... She remembers her friends who died. There has always been a negative impact left on her. She was married young, she was 18. She came here when she was 28. She had my brother and sister by 20, 1 year between them. It must have been hard on a 19 year old. I'm 19 myself and I can't imagine having two kids (Female, Kurdish heritage).

Those from Vietnamese backgrounds talked more about the silence of their parents and about how little they knew of their pasts. When stories were told, it was, most often, about the boat journey from Vietnam and being in a refugee camp in Hong Kong waiting to be resettled. Sarah was not unusual in explaining how she knew little about her parents' lives in Vietnam but she was nevertheless able to describe the dangerous journey:

> My parents never tell me anything [about the past] I think they just want to move on from it, so it happened that they're in a better place, they don't want to think about it, that's why they don't talk about it... I know that my mum during the war with my gran they tried to escape Vietnam. So they were in a boat but their boat had too many people and I think it was broken and was sinking but then they were saved by the navy, by the British navy.

The journey itself, as Benezer and Zetter note, 'is a profoundly formative and transformative experience' (2014: 302) and this explains why, among the migrant generation from Vietnam, the journey forms part of the foundation

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article-abstract/31/4/647/4883360 by guest on 19 February 2020

narrative for the family and is part of the selection of what is shared, even where little else about life prior to leaving Vietnam is discussed (Granata and Sarcinelli 2012; Nunn 2012). Part of the journey was the time in the camps in Hong Kong and the resettlement destination. Lucy, who knew little about the war or her parents' lives prior to displacement, explains what she did know:

> They left, I know it was because of the war, but I don't know. My mum did tell me that they went to Hong Kong, when they were in the refugee camp in Hong Kong, she did tell me she didn't actually put London down as a place she wanted to go to, she wanted to go to America or Japan, or Australia but then the plane came for London and her name was on the list so she just had to come to London. If it was through her choice, she wouldn't be living in London. That's all I know really (Female, Vietnamese heritage).

So far, the analysis has shown the clear differences between the three groups in terms of the memories shared intergenerationally; however, there were similarities too and the main one was the way in which most interviewees referred at some point in the interview to their parents' socio-economic status prior to migration. The emphasis on class in intergenerational narratives can be particularly evident when displacement had led to a loss of status and resources (Sharma 2009), with narratives taking an almost apologetic form framed around both regret and ambition to regain what was lost. Saama, in the following quote, talks about her parents' lives in Sri Lanka, reflecting on the impact of their loss in status on them:

> they were [from] very well to do families. They feel like they had a status there [Sri Lanka], which they did, both of my parents are high class. They had respect and they came here and respect was not given...they definitely feel like they've lost something, there is a loss there, and a sadness attached to that loss, definitely a sadness (Female, Tamil heritage).

Like Saama, Kim indicated that she too came from an affluent background, which was unusual among those we interviewed from Vietnam:

> we came from a wealthy background. In Vietnam, our family were, how would you call it, aristocracy. They had businesses, they had money, they had power, the Prime Minister ate with my granddad, they had servants, everything. And then we had to basically leave the country with only the clothes on our back, start all over again. It was a drastic change for my family, especially to have to work, and they do work very, very hard (Female, Vietnamese heritage).

Kim describes her parents' 'struggle' as a consequence of their lost status and how this motivates her to strive to regain the lost wealth and status of her family. In fact, she goes so far as to say that 'I feel it is my obligation to do well, to make them proud'.

Narratives of poverty could be equally motivating and were used by parents as a way to encourage children to reflect on the past in relation to possible futures. Thus, opportunities for education, financial stability,

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article-abstract/31/4/647/4883360 by guest on 19 February 2020

security and the repositioning of gender relations all featured in the intergenerational narratives and could be received in different ways by the second generation. In the quote below, Leelong explains how his mother compares Vietnam with the United Kingdom:

> So say we were cheeky or bad at school she'd just say about how horrible it is in Vietnam and the opportunities and the things she had to go through and how poor and impoverished they were and that we should be eternally grateful that we're in a country where we can be better (Male, Vietnamese heritage).

The pressure to make good, through their own successes, their parents' unrealized aspirations was close to the surface. Krishnan appeared to be framing his life around what he thought would make his parents happy, saying 'everything I do I do for my parents, so if they're satisfied I'm satisfied' (Male, Tamil heritage) and he was not alone in his ambition. The children of the migrant generation can become the objects of restitution with a need to fulfil the roles projected onto them by their parents (Fekjær and Leirvik 2011; Richter 2017). The desire to please parents, to make up in some way for the missed opportunities and the losses they had endured, shaped aspirations. Zelat framed her ambitions within the past and the present and by comparing her mother with herself—in relation to gender roles. These comparisons motivated her to be an independent woman, using the word 'proud' to express how she wants her mother and family to feel:

> Being Kurdish in Turkey was very hard and in the circumstances there she was married at 18, had her kids and couldn't really live her life so what she wanted me to do were the things she couldn't. Like educate yourself then live your life. So it is important, especially when I think about my mum and making her and my family proud and for myself. Standing on my own two feet, not relying on anyone else (Zelat, Female, Kurdish heritage).

For the second generation, it was clear that the past very much framed their present and was the lens through which they understood their parents' lives. The stories told could be powerful tools and it is perhaps unsurprising that the final similarity was the propensity to share the dramatic stories of death, heroism and bravery. Where there had been family bereavements, the dead were talked about to ensure that they were not forgotten. Janith, for example, explained how the story of his aunt, who died in the conflict, 'was quite a frequent story'. Stories of bravery also featured particularly where the journey had been dangerous, as it was among those who travelled by boat from Vietnam:

> I'm just in awe at this exodus they made and how they were able to raise us here. I think about how different my life would have been if my mum hadn't done that act of bravery, she was the only one in her family who chose to leave and the chances of surviving were so small and if you left you couldn't come

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article-abstract/31/4/647/4883360 by guest on 19 February 2020

> back because you'd be a fugitive. And she was by herself. So she rode the high seas (Tammi, Female, Vietnamese heritage).

In her quote above, Tammi talked about the journey, linking her mother's story of bravery with her own life. The fluidity of the past and present and the locating of the past through the lens of the present demonstrate how family histories are reframed according to the needs of the person telling the story (Welzer 2010).

The Telling of Stories and Sharing of Memories: Context and Proximity

Context and proximity often facilitate intergenerational narratives and can be triggered by place, space, time and multi-sensory stimuli. Food, return visits, photographs and family visits to the United Kingdom could all result in the sharing of stories and memories. West (2017) notes how even smell can engender memory and, in our study, Sophie explained how food, which is closely entwined with the senses, led to family discussions:

> when my mum was cooking certain food, and my dad criticises her cooking, he always mentions, back in China we did this, back in Vietnam we did this differently, everything's all changed now, he just goes on. And we sit there and ask them about how things were different back home, what the food was like, and yeah we can sit there talking to my mum for about half an hour listening to what they went through (Sophie, Female, Vietnamese heritage).

Visiting the country of their parents' birth could precipitate narratives and lead to comparisons and reflections on the past and present. In the quote below, Anton describes Sri Lanka as a 'little place'; later in his interview he talks about the tiny home where his father grew up and where nine people slept in the same room, comparing it to the large house his father now owned:

> When I went to Sri Lanka I used to ask how the hell did you live in this little place?... they used to tell me everything, all about the wars and stuff... [and] ... good stories about family (Anton, Male, Tamil heritage).

John's parents had come to the United Kingdom as refugees from Vietnam via a camp in Hong Kong but he explained in his interview that he knew little about their lives prior to coming to the United Kingdom and that they never talked about the war. There was one exception to this and it occurred during a family visit to Vietnam, where proximity and context resulted in his father recounting a bombing:

> I was in a car with him [father] when we were in Vietnam, we were just driving around and we were driving over this bridge and he was telling me when he was younger, this just all got bombed. And it was so much detail, he was going into so much detail, and for me I barely remember anything growing up. Essentially

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article-abstract/31/4/647/4883360 by guest on 19 February 2020

> he said to me, when you grow up, and this kind of thing happens, you can never forget (John, Male, Vietnamese heritage).

In the quote above, John reflects on his lack of childhood memories and compares that with the vividness and detail of his father's memories as a consequence of trauma and, in so doing, he is acknowledging the significance of his father's experiences and how they differ from his own.

Others alluded to life course as an explanation for their increasing level of interest in their parents' pasts. Rachel's parents were not spontaneous in sharing their histories; having a sense of identity as a Tamil and an association with her Sri Lankan heritage were nevertheless central throughout her life and, when asked, her parents would answer questions: 'they wouldn't actually talk about their past but if I initiate it and ask them questions then they'll answer generally. Especially now I'm quite curious' (Rachel, Female, Tamil heritage).

Others too from Tamil backgrounds explained that, while the stories were not always spontaneously shared, when direct questions were asked, they would receive an answer. However, in contrast, those from Vietnamese backgrounds often felt that their questions were met with silence, leaving them with a feeling of being shut down. While the reasons for this silence will be complex, what we do know is that coming from a Chinese background—as many Vietnamese refugees in the United Kingdom do—was seen to be influential, as Giang explained:

> I have a lot of Vietnamese friends who don't speak about it too much. People who come from Vietnam may well have come from Chinese families. So some people were kicked out, some 'advised to leave' so even though they have Vietnamese names, they may have been Chinese. For all intents and purposes they are Vietnamese. But they are very bitter about the country and don't like talking about it (Giang, Male, Vietnamese heritage).

The consequence was an unspoken agreement between generations (Frankish and Bradbury 2012) that could lead to frustration and alternative strategies to find out about their histories, which is explored in the next section.

Understanding Narrative Gaps and Silences and Seeking Answers

Many of our interviewees tried to make sense of silences and narrative gaps by seeing them as a protective strategy, a way of moving on, of not burdening children with the trauma of pre-migration experiences or as part of the efforts to live in the present and to focus on the future, not the past. In instances when the second generation were aware of their parents' pre-migration trauma, avoidance narratives was used and interpreted as a mechanism for not reliving the past. Emily, for example, attributes her mother's silences and/or very brief responses to her questions as a consequence of the memories being 'difficult' and 'painful', but she also offered a normative explanation for these silences: 'I don't know if you know this about Chinese families

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article-abstract/31/4/647/4883360 by guest on 19 February 2020

generally but we don't really talk about things that are troubling' (Female, Vietnamese heritage).

In some cases, this resulted in the double wall of silence—parents did not volunteer information and/or closed down questions and so children either did not ask or stopped asking, as Ly explained: 'whenever I ask they ... get annoyed so I don't ask anymore ... I'll ask them questions and they won't give me answers' (Female, Vietnamese heritage).

Ly felt closed down by her parents and then went on to describe her lack of knowledge about her parents' lives as 'sad', conveying a sense of her own pain and loss and a distancing from her parents.

Silences were also seen as a protective strategy. Vanan was unsure why his parents did not talk about the past but, while reflecting on this in the interview, he stated that 'Perhaps they didn't want to burden me with it' (Male, Tamil heritage).

Not knowing about parents' lives does not remove the impact of their histories. Those born to Holocaust survivors, notes Hoffman, 'sense it's most inward meanings first and have to work their way outwards toward the facts' (2004: 16). The idea of wanting to know about the past, seeking out knowledge or creating spaces for sharing histories emerged in our interviews. Tammi, of Vietnamese heritage, was 27 years old at the time of her interview and was working as a community theatre director, putting on plays about 'the south east Asian diaspora'. When talking about her work, she reflected on the second generation, her relationship with her parents and how their backgrounds have shaped her. She describes how she uses theatre:

> as a vehicle really to bring awareness to certain issues in the south east Asian diaspora. Helping the second generation to know more about their roots ... I'm really passionate about getting the second generation to not ignore their history (Female, Vietnamese heritage).

In trying to develop her ideas for work, she attempted to interview her parents and explained their reluctance to talk and/or to censor what was said as part of the impact of their experiences. Other research has noted how being cautious about what was said and to whom persisted among those from Vietnam, even decades after leaving (Maffini and Pham 2016). While Tammi understood her parents' silence about the past, it still had consequences for her, as she explained:

> I think there's quite a lot of suspicion, they're quite scared still to talk because I remember my mum saying to my dad 'don't tell her too much' so it was only the nice, funny things they told me ... they just didn't want to talk to me about it ... they just kept quiet, they were used to keeping quiet, survival was about keeping quiet. She'd got so used to being quiet. I understand it now. For me the war shapes me it's like I've been through it in a weird way (Female, Vietnamese heritage).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article-abstract/31/4/647/4883360 by guest on 19 February 2020

Intergenerational narratives are not the only way in which stories are inherited (Sharma 2009). Those interviewed in this study were proactive in seeking out alternative avenues for developing knowledge, including through individual research, through other family members and from friends. Emily, for example, could not find out anything about her past from her parents. She understood that her parents did not want to talk about painful memories, but it impacted on her sense of identity and self and so she made choices that allowed her to understand her history and her identity:

> I think there was a time when me and my sister had actually asked my mum about the war and what happened. But she'd only give very brief, short answers. So I think maybe it's just painful memories... when I was struggling as a teenager, I did used to think to myself maybe if my parents hadn't left Vietnam and I was a majority I wouldn't be so conflicted and confused about who I was and about my own journey, basically it was so unknown, our parents weren't talking about it.... So I had to discover it myself. So I studied anthropology. Did my undergraduate dissertation on the Chinese community so I've actually been on my own discovery really. Where I've come from has then shaped my life hugely (Emily, Female, Vietnamese heritage).

Networks of other family members, acquaintances and peer groups were also important sources of information. Giang, for example, knew about his mother's journey, which included being rescued from a sinking boat and being taken to Hong Kong, from a cousin. Krishnan explained how he obtained the information he wanted in the absence of parental narratives about the past. These alternative networks became part of the sense-making practices among the second generation:

> I found out a lot of things through my friends rather than my parents. I'd go to the temple and people my age would talk about it and some of the older brothers would come over and talk to us about everything that was going on back home, because they were heavily involved politically. So I'd find out more from them than from my parents. So for them it wasn't something they'd go out their way to talk to me about, maybe to protect me I'm not sure (Krishnan, Male, Tamil heritage).

The lack of communication between generations could also result in a distancing between generations. John, whose parents rarely talked about the past, reflected on this, saying 'I don't feel like I know a great amount about them'. The stories and the silences and narrative gaps are not neutral, but have different functions and different consequences.

Conclusion

The telling of stories and the silences are significant for the second generation. Telling stories can build bridges between generations, giving children a better sense of their history and identity, but they can also result in guilt,

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article-abstract/31/4/647/4883360 by guest on 19 February 2020

gratitude and a sense of duty—the need to please and to compensate for the trauma, sacrifices and losses of parents. The interpretation of these stories by the second generation and therefore the impact on them needs to be understood. I noted earlier the use of the word 'proud' in some of the narratives—the need to offer restitution by doing well and by fulfilling expectations and the blocked dreams of their parents. But among some there was also a visceral pain for their parents' losses—something noted in the post-holocaust literature and something that lives on in the second generation almost as an embodiment of their parents' experiences (Hoffman 2004). While displacement and trauma may have been part of the past, they are part of the present too, even if not part of a narrative that is shared between generations (Hirsch 2008).

Focusing on the second generation and exploring the three different heritage groups have offered insights into the significance of the displacement context on the narratives told. However, as well as the differences between the heritage groups, there were also similarities. Among Vietnamese, silences were most evident, even when questions were asked directly of parents. With the exception of the journey and the camp, little was known about life in Vietnam except the few cases where a lost high socio-economic status or poverty was used as a mechanism for motivating success. The war was rarely talked about and some of the second generation sensed an ongoing habitual behaviour of silence as a means of protection and safety even decades after migration. Among those from Tamil backgrounds, Sri Lanka was talked about but it was often the positive aspects of life rather than the civil war, although the data does show how there was often a slippage into painful memories of civil war, violence and discrimination and so the juxtaposition between the two was a feature of the narratives. Among those from Kurdish backgrounds, the more recent arrival to the United Kingdom of their parents and the poverty, violence and discrimination they had experienced and evidenced were central to the intergenerational narratives. When the second generation reflected on their parents' stories of loss, there were expressions of pain and the desire to be part of the healing process. The narratives told evoked comparisons of the past with the present, the parents' life prior to migration and life in the United Kingdom. Where there were silences or narrative gaps, some sought information elsewhere, needing to know more to contextualize their own lives and as part of their identity formation.

Although there are clear patterns between the three groups, the analysis is limited by the relatively small number of interviews carried out. However, regardless of the methodological limitations, the article highlights the complexities of pasts, of family relationships, of aspirations and desires, and of responses to memory and trauma, and therefore demonstrates the need to take a biographical approach. There is no one intergenerational narrative or no one interpretation of the stories told or the perceptions of what is missing and why, but instead a multitude of possibilities over time that are shaped by re-narration and through the lens and fluidity of experiences. The second

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article-abstract/31/4/647/4883360 by guest on 19 February 2020

generation from refugee backgrounds, who are often forgotten in policy arenas and in research and scholarship, have experiences that are framed and shaped by their parents' histories of persecution and trauma and through migration and resettlement. The refugee cycle does not end with the refugee generation, but continues through postmemory that is inherited through narratives, but also through the gaps and silences.

Acknowledgements

The research that this article is based on was funded by the Swiss Network for International Studies, project number 13–6401. Thanks to my colleagues and collaborators on the project: Shirin Hirsch, Milena Chimienti, Anne-Laure Counilh, Laurence Ossipow, Giovanna Tattolo and Catherine Wihtol de Wenden. Thanks also to colleagues Suki Ali, Kirsten Campbell and Amal Treacher Kabesh for taking the time to read and discuss drafts and to the anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments.

ALI, S. (2012) 'The Sense of Memory'. *Feminist Review* 100(1): 88–105.

BENEZER, G. and ZETTER, R. (2014) 'Searching for Directions: Conceptual and Methodological Challenges in Researching Refugee Journeys'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 28(3): 297–318.

BLOCH, A., CHIMIENTI, M., COUNILH, A.-L., HIRSCH, S., TATTOLO, G., OSSIPOW, L. and WIHTOL DE WENDEN, C. (2015) *The Children of Refugees in Europe: Aspirations, Social and Economic Lives, Identity and Transnational Linkages*, Final Report—Working Paper. Geneva: SNIS.

CRUL, M., SCHNEIDER, J. and LELIE, F. (2012) *The European Second Generation Compared: Does the Integration Context Matter*? Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

DALGAARD, N. T. and MONTGOMERY, E. (2015) 'Disclosure and Silencing: A Systematic Review of the Literature on Patterns of Trauma Communication in Refugee Families'. *Transcultural Psychiatry* 52(5): 579–593.

EASTMOND, M. (2007) 'Stories as Lived Experience: Narratives in Forced Migration Research'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20(2): 248–264.

EYERMAN, R. (2004) 'The Past in the Present: Culture and the Transmission of Memory'. *Acta Sociologica* 47(2): 159–169.

FEKJÆR, S. and LEIRVIK, M. (2011) 'Silent Gratitude: Education among Second-generation Vietnamese in Norway'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37(1): 117–134.

FRANKISH, T. and BRADBURY, J. (2012) 'Telling Stories for the Next Generation: Trauma and Nostalgia'. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 18(3): 294–306.

GRANATA, A. and SARCINELLI, A. S. (2012) 'Children's Views on Parents' Tales: Intergenerational Transmission among Transnational Minorities'. *New Cultural Frontiers* 3: 69–90.

HIRSCH, M. (2008) 'The Generation of Postmemory'. *Poetics Today* 29(1): 103–128.

HIRSCH, M. and SPITZER, L. (2009) 'The Witness in the Archive: Holocaust Studies/Memory Studies'. *Memory Studies* 2(2): 151–170.

HOFFMAN, E. (2004) *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust*. New York: Public Affairs.

HOFFMAN, E. (2010) 'The Long Afterlife of Loss', in Radstone, S. and Schwarz, B. (eds) *Memory: History, Theories and Debates*. New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 406–415.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article-abstract/31/4/647/4883360 by guest on 19 February 2020

KIDRON, C. A. (2009) 'Toward an Ethnography of Silence: The Lived Presence of the Past in the Everyday Lives of Holocaust Trauma Descendants in Israel'. *Current Anthropology* 50(1): 5–27.

KIDRON, C. A. (2012) 'Breaching the Wall of Traumatic Silence: Holocaust Survivor and Descendant Person–Object Relations and the Material Transmission of the Genocidal Past'. *Journal of Material Culture* 17(1): 3–21.

LEV-WIESEL, R. (2007) 'Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma across Three Generations: A Preliminary Study'. *Qualitative Social Work* 6(1): 75–94.

LEWIS, D. (2008) 'Types, Meanings and Ambivalence in Intergenerational Exchanges among Cambodian Refugee Families in the United States'. *Ageing & Society* 28: 693–715.

LOIZOS, P. (2007) 'Generations in Forced Migration'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20(2): 193–210.

MAFFINI, C. S. and PHAM, A. N. (2016) 'Overcoming a Legacy of Conflict: The Repercussive Effects of Stress and Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma among Vietnamese Americans'. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 25(6): 580–597.

NUNN, C. (2012) 'Người Úc Gốc Việt: Generational Change and Intergenerational Relations Among Vietnamese Australians', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia.

PUVIMANASINGHE, T., DENSON, L. A., AUGOUSTINOS, M. and SOMASUNDARAM, D. (2014). 'Narrative and Silence: How Former Refugees Talk about Loss and Past Trauma'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 28(1): 69–92.

RICHTER, J. (2017) 'Intergenerational Layers of Silence: How the Concealed or the Outspoken Remain Undiscussable or Indescribable'. In Auestad, L. and Treacher Kabesh, A. (eds) *Traces of Violence and Freedom of Thought*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

ROBINSON, V. and HALE, S. (1989) *The Geography of Vietnamese Secondary Migration in the UK*. Warwick: ESRC Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations.

SANGALANG, C. and VANG, C. (2017) 'Intergenerational Trauma in Refugee Families: A Systematic Review'. *Journal of Immigration Minority Health* 19(3): 745–775.

SHARMA, V. (2009) 'Inherited Memories: Second Generation Partition Narratives from Punjabi Families in Delhi *and Lahore'. Cultural and Social History* 6(4): 411–428.

SMART, C. (2011) 'Families, Secrets and Memories'. *Sociology* 45(4): 539–553.

WELZER, H. (2010) 'Re-narrations: How Pasts Change in Conversational Remembering'. *Memory Studies* 3(1): 5–17.

WEST, T. (2017) 'The Steps at Mariental: Gaps, Incompleteness and Shared Spaces'. *Ethnography* 18(2): 240–256.

WISEMAN, H., METZL, E. and BARBER, J. P. (2006) 'Anger, Guilt, and Intergenerational Communication of Trauma in the Interpersonal Narratives of Second Generation Holocaust Survivors'. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 76(2): 176–184.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article-abstract/31/4/647/4883360 by guest on 19 February 2020