Voices from Detention: An Exploration of Undocumented Immigrants' Journeys

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VOICES FROM DETENTION: AN EXPLORATION OF UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS’ JOURNEYS

Michaela Malboeuf & Dr. Connie M. Koski
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BACKGROUND & PURPOSE

• Criminalization of Immigration in America
  • The transition of immigration into a criminal offense
• Giving voices to the voiceless
  • Voices of the Undocumented (Rosenfield & Fortunati, 2015)
RESEARCH QUESTION:

What do the voices from detention have to say?
Focusing on the migration and detention experience.
How do participants make meaning of, or “narrate” their lived experiences?
Theoretical Framework

- Symbolic Interactionism
  - Making meaning of lived experiences
  - Linking the individual and society through the construction of meaning
  - Addresses the interactional bases of subjective interpretations and the sociocultural aspects of social behavior (Stryker & Gottlieb, 1981)

- Accounts
  - The practice of constructing meaningful selves, identities, and realities (Goffman, 1959 and others)
  - Daily interactions and the use of talk are the significant mechanisms by which individuals neutralize negative acts or their consequences (Scott & Lyman, 1968)
<table>
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<tr>
<th>THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK CONTINUED</th>
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<td>• Current theoretical viewpoints also emphasize that accounts are not merely social constructions to protect the self but they also…</td>
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<td>• Give individuals a greater sense of control and understanding of their environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Allow individuals to cope with the emotionally charged and stressful events</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Produce some degree of closure</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Provide a greater sense of hope and will for the future</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Establish order in daily relational experiences (Orbuch, 1997)</td>
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SETTING & PARTICIPANTS

• **Private Immigration Detention Facility in south-central Virginia**
  
  • *Largest immigration detention facility on East coast*
    
    • Currently housing over 600 male detainees with plans to expand to housing females
    
    • Average length of stay = 18 weeks: some have been there less; others for 2 years
    
    • *Solely housing detainees for U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.)*
      
      • Federal Secure Communities program detainees
      
      • Detainees classified into various security levels (4 levels from low to high)

• **Participants are Detainees housed under the above program**
  
  • Attend ESL classes on “High Security” night
  
  • Are “advanced” English speakers
  
  • Purposive sample
    
    • Voluntarily wish to tell their story
METHOD

• Comparative Case Study
• Approximately 1 hour initial interviews with follow-ups
• Semi-structured flexible interview schedule
• Questions included:
  • “Why did you migrate to the U.S.?”
  • “How would you describe your immigration and detainment process?”
  • “What are your thoughts on current immigration legislation?”
  • “What are your fears and hopes for the future?”
FINDINGS

**ABDUL**
- Child soldier from Sierra Leone
- Drug interdiction traffic stop
- “Corrupt” immigration legislation
- Role Model Dad

**AMAN**
- Visitor from Palestine
- Possession of a firearm or ammunition by a prohibited person
- “Everyone gets arrested!”
- Change in political climate & family health
### Findings Continued

**Abdul**
- Use of excuses
  - Poor community environment, no role model
- Troubled but improving
  - Being better for his family
- Storytelling as relief
- Hopeful/scared
  - “I messed up”
- Wavering hope
  - “I’m scared…. But I hope they won’t find a country to send me to and I will be walking out of here by December”

**Aman**
- Use of justifications
- Fault in the dual legal system
- Successful and accomplished
  - “Trump should have more immigrants like me.”
- Storytelling as relief
- Solution Driven
  - Platform for education & reform
- Confident and hopeful for change
  - “I’m walking out of here on November 15th”
LIMITATIONS

- Only 2 cases
- Non-Random sample/generalizability
  - Only detainees from one detention center
  - Only advanced English speakers
  - Only from a sample of “high security” detainees
- Reliability
  - Establishment of truth is not the primary goal of narrative analysis
- Restrictions by the center made obtaining full (recorded or written) interviews difficult
CHALLENGES

- Never really knew if participant would be back for follow ups.
- Gaining access/ “Getting in”
- Gaining Rapport
- Some officers unfamiliar with our permission to interview
- The balance between “watching, listening, and observing” vs keeping participants on track.
DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

• Aman and Abdul illustrate that the stereotypes behind why and how people end up in immigration detention center are not monolithic.

• Despite Aman and Abdul’s differences, both men emphasize the collateral consequences to familial relationships.
QUESTIONS?

Thank you!
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