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Voices from Detention: An Exploration of Undocumented Immigrants' Journeys


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**VOICES FROM DETENTION: AN
EXPLORATION OF UNDOCUMENTED
IMMIGRANTS' JOURNEYS**

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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)



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK CONTINUED

- Current theoretical viewpoints also emphasize that accounts are not merely social constructions to protect the self but they also...
 - Give individuals a greater sense of control and understanding of their environment
 - Allow individuals to cope with the emotionally charged and stressful events
 - Produce some degree of closure
 - Provide a greater sense of hope and will for the future
 - Establish order in daily relational experiences (Orbuch, 1997)



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 detention 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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