

4-27-2017

# The Power of Ethnography: From Storytelling to Compassion

Danica Simonet

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, DISIMONET@CSBSJU.EDU

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/elce\\_cscday](http://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/elce_cscday)

---

## Recommended Citation

Simonet, Danica, "The Power of Ethnography: From Storytelling to Compassion" (2017). *Celebrating Scholarship & Creativity Day*. 133.

[http://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/elce\\_cscday/133](http://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/elce_cscday/133)

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Celebrating Scholarship & Creativity Day by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csbsju.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csbsju.edu).

## **The Power of Ethnography: From Storytelling to Compassion**

It was uncommon for Kamal not to hear from his family for more than a few days, but he had not heard from them in over two weeks. While he waited for some form of communication that let him know that his family was still alive, many different possibilities were running through his head and he feared for the worst. Kamal is a Syrian refugee living in Berlin. He still has family in the besieged city of Aleppo, who have little access to food and water, and lack rights of citizenship on which to make any claims of the state. The family lives near a communication tower that provides the area with internet connection and it is the site of Assad's, army. The local community lives in constant fear that the Free Syrian Army will attack at any time, particularly with barrel bombs, targeting the communication tower, as well as the surrounding neighborhoods. Targeting Kamal's mother, father, brother, sister-in-law, nephew, and sister. Targeting Kamal's source of life, encouragement, and hope. It was an unbearable thought for Kamal, so he searched for a way to get a hold of his family, through whatever means possible. Luckily, his friend Alfred, a Berliner himself, had access to an operating system that called international numbers inexpensively. Kamal jumped on the chance to hear a family member's voice and as his heart beat with fear, frustration, despair and hope.

Kamal, of course, had his family's phone number memorized. He dialed it like his life depended on hearing a voice from home, because in a sense, it truly did. There was no other sound in the room, all other senses ceased to exist, except for the beating of Kamal's heart. The phone call went to voicemail. There was no voice on the other end giving Kamal a sense of relief that life could go on. He then tried his mother. Again, no voices, no answer, only an even quicker heartbeat. He needed a voice to serve as a relief that he had not lost another member of his family, that he had not lost what sustains him. He dialed his sister, remembering that she tended

to pick up the phone. There was only a voicemail, a recollection of her voice, but no testimony to her living presence. There was only one option left: Kamal's brother, who shared a stark resemblance with Kamal in the many photographs they had with one another. As a bystander in this room of anxious silence, I could not stop paying attention to the lengthy, obnoxious dial, reminding me how much was at stake, patronizing me, making me wish I could remove myself from the situation. In that moment, I realized I could never understand how much anxiety my friend was going through. Then there was a voice. The repressed anxiety suddenly formed into a silent expression of a silent sob. There was a life-affirming, relieving breath in the sound of a single voice, and life could finally restart itself.

I met Kamal during my fieldwork in Berlin, Germany. In Berlin, I worked with a project called Open Art Shelter, which serves as a safe and creative space for refugees. I told Kamal's story to Mia, who was sympathetic to the growing anti-immigrant Nationalist movements spreading across Europe, and also happened to be my aunt. I could see how this story impacted her. She listened attentively, wondering if Kamal would hear from his family, who would be the one to pick up the phone, and how he would react to such a situation. After hearing the story, Mia asked me questions about Kamal's larger narrative: How old is Kamal? Did he work in Syria? Where is his family? Is he able to work here? Mia began to care, even if momentarily, about Kamal's well-being, or at least she became curious about his larger story. While Kamal's story may be a more emotional one, Mia's story demonstrates the power of ethnography.

As Mia's experience illuminates, stories elicit questions from the reader or listener. Anthropologists have long used narrative in order to draw on people's lived experiences in ways that illuminate complex human experiences (change). For example, anthropologist Catherine Bolten analyzes how personal narration of survival during Sierra Leone's ten-year civil war

illuminated a moral and social framework orientated towards care and material investment in others. Thus, human narrative allows the reader or listener to ask questions about what the storyteller has gone through and what their current and future needs are. By humanizing an issue, we are able to ask moral questions which emanate from the well-being of the storyteller. Arthur Kleinman, in his book, *The Illness Narratives*, shares how patients he worked with described their illnesses as personal narratives. According to Kleinman, the illness narrative is “a story the patient tells, and significant others retell, to give coherence to the distinctive events and long-term course of suffering” (49). Through my experience in Berlin, I heard many narratives of suffering from different individuals. One Monday, while chatting with women from Afghanistan, one woman shared her story with me: “When my older son was killed in the war, my younger son and daughter were so little. After this incident, we didn’t have a single happy day. If we experienced happiness in Afghanistan, we could never come to this place. In Afghanistan, we had everything...In our country, we had a place to call home. Here there is no peace, nobody can be comfortable. Men, women, boys, and girls all have to sleep together. It is not fair.” Oftentimes, what happens during refugee crises or with immigrant narratives, personal narratives are often drowned out.

To combat generalized refugee stories, we can turn to the power of ethnography, which provides detailed, contextual insight. James Clifford, an anthropologist whose work on ethnography is seminal in the field, describes that ethnographies, which are “[performances] emplotted by powerful stories...encompass additional meaning beyond the local cultures they presume to present” (98). In other words, narrative helps us to see the broader structures at play and how they impact human experiences. From this point, we can learn how to improve human conditions. Specifically, in the case of refugees, ethnographies provide insights into what

refugees expected from Germany as they fled their native lands. They also portray how the isolation, boredom, and constraints of refugee camps affect their healing from their traumatic experiences. Finally, ethnographies offer awareness of what programs would be beneficial to help refugees integrate into the German society. Without personal, powerful ethnographic accounts, we are unable to understand refugees' deeply contextualized and personalized experiences.

Through fieldwork in Berlin, Germany, I saw caseworkers privilege efficiency over personal, tragic, and brave refugee stories. To give some context: In 2015, Germany received more than 476,000 asylum-seekers. Since then, the number has continued to increase, and is now over one million, according to Germany's EASY system, which is responsible for counting and distributing people before they apply for asylum. While I can understand that it is not easy to pay attention to individual stories, especially when a mass amount of people are migrating into a new country, I do believe that without personal stories that are representative of types of experiences that many refugees have, the true issues and conflicts of integration and resettlement will not be addressed.

When I think of the challenges of a system which prioritizes efficiency over people, the story of an Afghan mother in her mid-thirties, living in a Hangar at Tempelhof, a Berlin airport closed in 2008, comes to mind. Her body hurt with every move because 3 years ago her husband almost killed her with a knife, after she reported him for multiple accounts of domestic and drug abuse. He continued to beat her continuously, so she decided to flee; it was her only option besides death. Then, her future and the future of her two children, aged 5 and 7, was decided in just a half an hour by a migration officer, who she had to prove her past suffering and potential future danger to. While in that brief interview, her past traumas were triggered during

interrogations, which made her body shaky and her mind foggy, which caused her to lose a part of herself, thus deeming her story “unconvincing.” The Afghan mother was not granted residency, and she was asked to go back to Afghanistan with her two children. Perhaps if the migration officer had a better sense of what this woman had gone through, there would have been a different outcome. When we chose “efficiency,” “protection” and “security,” we also chose generalization and miss many important steps of a person’s story. Yara, an 18-year-old from Syria, told me that what really “bothers [her] about the word “refugee” is how [they] are all stereotyped together. She said: “When a small group of refugees or Syrians do something bad, people start to generalize us and say, ‘All refugees are like this.’ That is simply not true.”

Give Something Back to Berlin organized a trip for refugees to travel to Poland with the objective of spending time with Polish citizens who are anti-refugee. Hania, the program director, originally from Poland, created an environment where refugees and Poles could communicate open and freely. The stories told by these refugees are much more powerful than stories coming from the TV or from magazines. In other words, stories told by the people who experienced them bring people in closer connection to each other. While the story I told my aunt, Mia, did have a strong impact on her, it would have been more effective coming from Kamal himself. When Mia met Kamal for the first time, instead of hearing a single story, she began to form a new narrative. She found out that Kamal used to be a graphic designer in Aleppo; that family is extremely important to Kamal; that Kamal protested for women’s rights while in college. In addition to hearing a story from the source, is it also important for listeners to hear stories from people they relate to. On a train back from Vienna, Mia met a German teacher who was giving German lessons to Afghan students. She described her students as devoted,

motivated, and grateful. Hearing this from a woman with a similar background helped Mia to contextualize and confirm the narrative she had now received from three different sources.

The power of ethnography is further demonstrated by the cognitive elements embedded into the narrative. In her book, *Upheavals of Thought*, Martha Nussbaum describes that compassion involves the recognition that the situation matters for flourishing. For example, when Germans realize that as a country with an older population, the waves of refugees will prove to be an asset to the German economy. As refugee children learn the German language, way of life, and are educated through a German model to contribute to both public and private life, Germans are more likely to be compassionate. Thus, as Mia internalizes the message of the Austrian teacher, that her students are devoted to learning German, and also open to adjusting to life in Germany, Mia will begin to have compassion for refugees. In addition, when Mia hears that Kamal was tortured and his mother requested him to flee Syria because he was left with two options: to flee or to die, Mia will have greater compassion for Kamal. Thus, Mia will become compassionate as she realizes that he does not embody many of the stereotypes of refugees as lazy, uneducated, and an economic drain on society. Mia, the listener realizes that, as Warsan Shire states in her poem *Home*, “no one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark / you only run for the border when you see the whole city running as well /”. In accordance with Nussbaum’s theory that underserved suffering appeals to our concepts of injustice, a narrative of injustice is sure to elicit a strong sense of compassion. In other words, there must be a dominant narrative that no one chooses to be a refugee. Shire’s poem continues, “You have to understand / no one puts their children in a boat / unless the water is safer than the land /”. Finally, to bridge the gap between storytelling and compassion, there must be a realization that “[this] type of suffering could

happen to me too.” For Germans to elicit a true sense of compassion, there must be a recognition that we could all be refugees.

For us to elicit compassion, we need to change the narrative that refugees are dangerous, lazy and undeserving. This change requires the humanization of the refugee narrative. For German society to be compassionate, there must be three main changes in the current anti-immigrant Nationalist narrative. The first change is a realization that refugees are beneficial to Germany’s economy. This change is necessary because people are searching for a narrative in which their gains are present. In other words, the empowerment of refugees also means the empowerment of the German economy. The second change is a narrative without a belief of fault. Therefore, the narrative must contain a notion that the situation is not the person or refugee’s fault, rather the situation was caused by external factors outside of the person’s control. Thirdly, the narrative must include the mindset that the type of suffering could happen to anyone, thus, anyone could become a refugee. In these three changes, there are two interwoven factors: interconnectivity and vulnerability. If we can form a narrative that we are all vulnerable and that for us to flourish as a society, we must all be empowered, then we can more easily form a compassionate, understanding society.