

Running head: *Understanding research as liberation psychology*

Partnership working as liberation psychology : forced labour amongst UK Chinese migrant workers

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In this paper we seek to reflect critically on some recent research we have carried out, in collaboration with a Chinese welfare NGO, on the experience of forced labour amongst Chinese migrant workers in the UK. We will a) locate briefly the wider political context of migrant work (both regular and irregular) in the UK; b) explore how and why the actual research methods and process of the research deviated, in practice from those that were planned; c) show the extent to which aspects of the research process reflected a liberation psychology perspective.

KEYWORDS *Forced labour, Chinese, migrant workers, liberation psychology*

OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

From 2009-2011 we undertook a project exploring the experiences of forced labour amongst Chinese migrant workers in the UK (Kagan et al., 2011), or modern slavery, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (see <http://www.jrf.org.uk/search/site/forced%20labour>).

With a community psychological orientation, we adopted a stance that saw migrant workers as active agents in decisions about their lives. Our research aimed to: examine the different ways that workers' ambitions, decisions and actions interacted with social and cultural conditions to influence workers' experiences of forced labour; explore the role of social networks, life events, transitions and turning points in the experience of forced labour over time; and identify different trajectories into, within and from forced labour combining individual agency, social and cultural conditions, life events and social networks.

We intended to use an empowerment, co-researcher model of research, wherein workers experiencing vulnerable work worked with a Mandarin speaking researcher to collect accounts from other exploited workers and gain skills in the process. These ambitions were not fully realised and the research took a more conventional route. Key to this change in direction as well as to workers' experiences and to the accounts that were collected - indeed to the whole research process- was anxiety about the regularity or legality of workers' status in the UK. Through the collection, via semi structured interviewing, of 32 personal accounts from migrant Chinese workers, most of whom had unauthorised employment status in the UK, we were able to paint a rich picture of exploitation, but also of individual and family agency. Whilst work was the intended focus, we found complex interactions between global and local political and economic circumstances in which workers were embedded, amidst family pressures, and the availability of work in the UK. We also found instances of forced labour and widespread exploitation at work with employers breaching many of the statutory regulations that exist to ensure decent working conditions. Skřivánková (2010) has proposed a continuum of exploitation from decent work to

forced labour and the workers in our study were placed at the forced labour end of the continuum, moving towards (sometimes into) and away from forced labour over time. However, here, we do not want to focus on findings from the study (Kagan et al, 2011) but rather the process of conducting the research.

RECENT TRENDS IN MIGRATORY FLOWS TO THE UK

Despite the difficulties in interpreting different data sources about migration (Boden & Rees, 2009) net immigration to the UK rose steadily from 1995-2008. By late 2009, the stock (that is the total number of resident migrants) of foreign born workers in the UK had reached 5.3million, or 14% of adults of working age, even though the flow (new migrants coming or leaving within a year) has been falling since 2006. There was a 16% increase in Chinese asylum seekers from 2008-9, and an overall 5% reduction in claims from Chinese migrants claiming asylum in 2009 (CEP, 2010; UNHCR, 2009). Of all ethnic groups, Chinese asylum seekers are the least likely to follow up their claims (NU-ILO, 2009), rendering their status insecure.

In the last decade the UK Government has been moving to a ‘managed immigration’ system, which, rather than limiting immigration, aims to manage it for economic advantage. Furthermore, enforcement practices have been extended and employers are deemed responsible for checking the immigration status of their employees, risking large fines if they employ ‘illegal’ workers. This presents problems for hospitality and catering industries, which favour migrant workers because of their greater flexibility, willingness to work longer hours and positive attitude (HAC, 2009; Lucas and Mansfield, 2010).

Migration, globalisation and the economic recession

Globalisation (Barnett, Held & Henderson, 2005) and the worldwide implementation of

the neoliberal economic model, has supported labour deregulation, which in turn has had the net effect of increasing subcontracting, driving down earnings and increasing labour uncertainty as different parts of the chain seek ever cheaper labour markets (Wills et al., 2010).

Local economic and social conditions in China meant that prospects for families of the workers in our study (who nearly all had low levels of education) were poor. Families contrived to pool resources to enable, with the help of highly paid travel facilitators, at least one family member to travel abroad for work. The intricacies of the global money markets and exchange rates, meant that even working for very low pay in the UK meant workers could earn considerably more than they would have been able to at home. Workers and their families made complex cost-benefit analyses to support the decisions to travel abroad, whilst enduring considerable risk and hardship, for work.

The workers in our study, on the whole, would be considered to be unforced migrants (Richmond, 1994) and not in need of humanitarian protection. And yet, the majority of them were either smuggled into the UK or sought asylum on entry or soon afterwards. As legal avenues for entry to unskilled workers have closed, asylum seeking is the only way to gain legal access to the UK. However, these detailed aspects of immigration and border controls were not understood by the workers themselves, rather they relied on advice given to them by travel facilitators who kept up with the changing border controls and immigration processes, knowing which could be used at any one time.

Immigration status and psychological pressure

Against this backdrop of identified migration flows, participants grappled with their status and the wider context. Whilst the majority of workers in our study were 'legal' insofar as they were asylum seekers, they had no identity documents such as passports, and their status as

asylum seekers meant they were not supposed to work. Yet, they had incurred large amounts of debt (up to £30,000) in order to travel to the UK, a debt, which their families paid off on their arrival. They, therefore, had to work in order to begin to pay back the money they owed. Thus as workers they were 'unauthorised' and as citizens they were 'undocumented'. This was a difficult situation exacerbated further as some workers did not pursue asylum claims (as they did not understand the system). In effect, they 'disappeared' from contact with the authorities. Others had their claims turned down. Both of these categories of workers' status changed from 'legal' to 'illegal'. A minority of the participants in the study entered the country with papers on a legal basis (for example with a work permit, student visa or visitor's visa) but over time their status changed as they overstayed their visas. At the time of participation in the study these workers were 'illegal' and 'unauthorised'.

KEY INGREDIENTS OF THE RESEARCH AND RESEARCH PROCESS

The community psychology (CP) team at Manchester Metropolitan University was contacted by a local non-governmental Chinese Welfare organisation, the Wai Yin Chinese Women Society (WY), staffed mainly by Chinese people and working with Chinese communities in the North West of England for over 20 years, amassing considerable knowledge about China and Chinese culture at home and abroad.

Workers and volunteers in the setting, had seen a growth in the case work they undertook with undocumented and unauthorised workers who had no access to state and local welfare services, and who were experiencing hardship. They could not return to China as it was impossible for them to confirm their nationality, thus remaining in a situation of statelessness. The WY and the CP team brought knowledge and experience and were not entering the field with naivety. In any piece of community psychological work it is important to understand 'what

went before' a particular project (Lorion, 2011).

Collaboration, homework and proposal development. The period of developing the research proposal was important for establishing the collaboration and ground rules for conduct of the research; and for the CP team to do its 'homework' about forced labour and the Chinese community; and for the WY team to do its 'homework' about different forms of empowerment research. Spivak (1990) talks about the importance of doing 'homework' in working with participants as acknowledging of power relations. Awareness of what we did not know and a preparedness to learn from the setting allowed fruitful collaboration to emerge. We held 6 whole team meetings with WY introducing readings to the CP team (in particular some journalistic accounts of forced labour (Hsai-Hung Pai, 2008) and other relevant accounts and case work). In return the CP team reviewed relevant literature and introduced the WY team to different theoretical models of migration and life-course study (in particular perspectives that combine individual agency with societal forces, such as de Jong and Graefe (2008). Through this process the whole team began to understand the different personal and organisational positions held.

Our previous work in university-community engagement (Kagan & Duggan, 2009) had alerted us to the dangers of retaining the majority of funds for research within the academy, and we sought to avoid doing this. Hence, we employed a researcher, but based her in the WY offices with all the support available, such as funds for office administration. The CP team was to supervise the research and we built in regular team meetings but clear lines of responsibility and accountability for different parts of the research. We aimed to produce lay digests of the research as well as technical reports.

This developmental process acted as an awareness raising as well as a leveling process, wherein the different expertise of WY and CP workers were combined. It also clarified for us all that the biggest barrier to participation was likely to be concern about 'status'. The WY project

enabled access to vulnerable workers who attended an English language class (the Oxfam funded Sunshine Group) and this was to be our first means of accessing participants. We built in particular features of the ethical protocol that gave added protection to workers' anonymity (such as not requiring them to sign any documents; nor using pictorial evidence of the research process).

Programme Board. The funder established a Programme Board consisting of national level senior policy makers and practitioners that was an important vehicle not only of advice throughout the process, but also as a vehicle for changing perceptions and understanding of the situation of migrant workers in the UK.

Researcher and research development. It was clear that we needed a Chinese speaking researcher, so early on in the project we recruited a researcher who had worked with WY as a volunteer and had experience of assisting with casework at the WY. We were lucky at the time to also have another WY graduate volunteer interested in working on the project in a voluntary capacity.

Two members of the CP team ran some research skills training workshops for the researchers during which they could explore different ways of eliciting information about life course 'journeys' as well as consider issues connected to language, interpretation and translation.

This work involved them sharing and exploring with each other the same issues that they were going to invite research participants to consider - issues linked to their personal migratory journeys. Neither of the researchers had really thought about these issues before, even though they had both migrated to the UK as students, and would potentially be in the same situation as the other research participants once their student visas came to an end. This process was not a comfortable one for the researchers, and one of the CP research supervisors discussed at length the emotional aspects of the exercises with the project researcher.

Both WY and CP teams recognised that there would need to be a phase during which trust was built between the research team and potential participants, members of the Sunshine Project. After a period of 4 months, the CP team with WY researchers, acting as interpreters ran some research awareness workshops for Sunshine Project members and workers. The idea of these was to provide some initial exploration of the skills needed to become co-researchers and to encourage interest in participating as co-researchers.

RESEARCH TRAINING

The research training workshops were postponed in order to enable more time to be spent on building trusting relationships.

The capacity building workshops were postponed, due to the need for more time to build relationships with potential participants interested to become co-researchers of the project. 2 sessions of the workshop took place and in total 22 learners from the Sunshine Project attended. We presented certificates to the attendees as recognition of their efforts to attend and provided lunch. The training sessions seemed to be more about introducing the attendees to the project itself, and to the nature of research, as some attendees indicated in their feedback. (Interim Report, August 2010).

Each of the workshops held with Sunshine Group members was punctuated repeatedly by questions about confidentiality, anonymity and the extent to which the research would enable workers to gain authorised 'status'. It was very difficult to get beyond these concerns. It was also clear that instead of being workshops to facilitate the skills of co-researchers, they acted as vehicles for enabling understanding of what was meant by 'research' - none of the potential participants had encountered the concept of research before. This was compounded by workshop questions being translated by WY researchers in either Mandarin or Cantonese and meaning

possibly being compromised by this. No-one wanted to become a co-researcher, although several people volunteered to be interviewed.

Abandonment of co-researcher model?

This meant that the research strategy had to change and it became one of the collection of life story accounts via semi-structured interviewing. The team abandoned methods that would enable the development of workers' skills at the same time as generating information. This was a painful decision the team had to make, as from the outset they had been concerned to find ways of empowering (through skills development, beyond giving a voice) vulnerable migrant workers. However, participative research of this sort cannot be forced and anxieties about becoming visible and being brought to the attention of the authorities dominated. Safety here was more important than enabling voice. On reflection, the research team considered that a much longer trust-building period was needed, as well as a process of gaining greater understanding about the nature and purpose of research. This experience was only a failure of the co-researcher process if we think of the individual research participants as co-researchers. Indeed, this was how the CP team had thought about the research. If, however, we think of the WY colleagues as our co-researchers then far from failing, we succeeded. This may in fact be an important way to think of the co-research process: WY workers were involved in the research design, preparation of research instruments; collection of data; interpretation of results and preparation and presentation of reports. WY workers gained skills and understanding and have been empowered by the process of the research, better able to understand the issues at stake, and better able to give guidance and advice through their other activities. Indeed, as this research was drawing to a close the WY were successful in building on it to gain funding for some further research into trafficked children: this in a very direct way the organisation has been empowered in terms of

Understanding research as liberation psychology

gaining more resources and diversifying their portfolio of projects. In every sense they were researchers and the notion of co-research, as typically defined in community psychology needs some rethinking in light of this.

Collecting accounts including translation

The collection of accounts was not easy. Once more the issue of anxiety over visibility and status emerged. This was brought home most forcibly when one of the participants asked the researcher, near the start of the interview, *'Do you want my real story or my immigration story?'*

When the researcher said she would prefer the 'real' story, the participant thought for a few moments and then said *'I'll give you the immigration story'*. The story told often needs to be retold at each point in the immigration process and thus the relating and maintenance of the story is needed. We do not know how many other people gave an immigration story, but understand the pressures participants felt under. In the light of loss of identity and both social and legal status, telling their story can be a form of resistance. It can also be a means of survival.

We do not know the extent to which individual participants saw the research process as part of 'authority', but we need to consider this as a possibility. Indeed, some theorists have argued that narratives produced via interviews are necessarily fictitious (Goodley et al, 2004). This is not to demean them but to note the process of interviewing which demands a story is told. More widely noted in narrative field is the transformative power of narratives and the way in which the telling of one's narrative is itself a form of resistance, a testimony of what has been endured (Giroux, 2005).

Interpreting data and crossing boundaries

Taking the WY partners as co-researchers, it is also instructive to consider dilemmas of interpreting data. All the interviews were undertaken in Chinese, so there was a literal interpretation and translation task to be done. Each interview was audio recorded. After each interview the researcher immediately wrote a summary of the 'story' in English, and prepared a short 'pen sketch' of the key points. These summaries were used in supervision and in research team meetings to consider overall issues arising. The WY researchers gave pseudonyms to the participants in order to facilitate familiarity. We were able to draw on the offer of time from the volunteer researcher who had undergone researcher development at the start of the project to undertake some translations of transcripts. Initially both researchers transcribed and translated the tapes separately. However, the small differences in both transcription and translation did not warrant this level of activity. The majority of the tapes were translated thereafter as they were transcribed with the project researcher translating those aspects of interviews that related to work and the second researchers translating the other parts of peoples' narratives.

Promotion of findings

Research of this sort will not have its greatest impact in academic journals and a number of different forms of publication and promotion of the findings were undertaken that included e-provision of the full project report and its summary findings (in English and Chinese), the placing of reports on key national and European websites, and radio interviews, Facebook and Twitter announcements.

One of the features of forced labour and exploitation of vulnerable workers is that it touches all sections of society: all those who eat cheaply in Chinese restaurants; buy pre-packaged supermarket foods; buy electrical goods and so on are end consumers of the process to which migrants have contributed their labour. It is hidden labour and thus if transformational

change is to be achieved, it is important to raise public awareness as well as official awareness. We know how successful some of this distribution of knowledge and understanding has been from comments of recipients of information about the project. During the plenary session of a conference at which one of the CP team spoke about the project, a well educated professional person who had been in the audience said:

I am still in shock at what I heard about the Chinese workers - I feel as if I've been poked in the eye with a burnt stick. I didn't know any of that. I feel as if I should have, but I didn't. I want to know what I can do about it and what people I know can do about it
(Audience feedback, Sustainable Development conference)

When we think about social change in relation to the exploitation of migrant workers, it is clear that it is not only those in positions of power and influence, or even those living oppressed lives themselves, who can contribute to transformational change.

HOW HAS THE RESEARCH BEEN INFORMED BY AND INFORMED A LIBERATION PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE?

Burton and Kagan (2009) draw on their previous work to select five core elements of a liberation psychology approach of relevance to the core capitalist countries and English speaking world. They are: 'conscientization'; 'realismo-crítico' and 'de-ideologisation'; the social-societal orientation; 'the preferential option for the oppressed majorities'; and methodological eclecticism. It should be noted that these elements should be regarded as illuminative descriptors of liberation psychology rather than as a definitive listing of constitutive elements. Nevertheless they are a helpful heuristic. For more recent examinations of the topic see (Burton & Gómez, in press; Burton, 2013a, b).

A social-societal orientation and preferential option for oppressed minorities

The research sought to place individual experience in a wider socio-cultural and historical context, particularly one relating to globalised economic and social relations and migratory flows.

We maintain that we cannot understand the personal accounts of migrant workers in separation from the wider social and cultural context and the broad migration-work-family nexus that renders them particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Nor can we separate their accounts from consideration of power, which is omnipresent. Power is to be found in different places and different forms: from the direct interpersonal control exerted by family members and travel facilitators to indirect social power located in the organisation of society via its borders and immigration rules and their enforcement. There are both economic and ideological bases to power in relation to exploitative migrant work, and it is this exposure that reflects a social-societal orientation (Burton & Kagan, 2009).

Liberation psychology, in its Latin American origins, stressed its focus on serving the needs of the popular majorities and their liberation from the social structures that keep them oppressed. As Burton and Kagan suggest, in core capitalist countries, the notion of the oppressed majority needs some reinterpretation. They suggest that psychology focus its attention to those whose experiences are distorted by the accumulation process, however fragmented their experiences. Migrant workers, driven to take personal risks and live underground lives as a consequence of border and immigration rules are indeed some of those whose lives are distorted by the accumulation process. Thus we argue, that whilst they constitute a minority in the UK, they are part of the wider, fragmented and dispersed oppressed majority.

De-ideologisation

this (Martín-Baró, (1985,)) is the process of peeling off layers of ideology that individualises and naturalises phenomena. This often involves challenging official discourses and

exposing the thinly disguised interests on which they are based. The ‘illegality’ of migrant workers status; their ‘abuse’ of the asylum system for economic gain are just some of the widely held attitudes and assumptions in relation to exploited migrant workers. These discourses are evident in the political debate with which we opened this paper (Hansard, 2009). Participants in our research were well aware of the force of their position, that of unauthorised or undocumented status, and their concerns permeated and impacted upon the whole research process. Through presentations to and discussion with the Programme Board, (which was co-ordinating a number of forced labour projects) as well as through project reports we have been able to expose and challenge some of the contradictions inherent in the distinction between, for example, forced and unforced migration; economic migration versus those in need of humanitarian protection; knowing abuse of border control systems. However, the process of de-ideologisation is incomplete. We succeeded in giving voice to individual participants, but cannot claim the full authenticity of these voices. Through promotion of the research findings we have contributed to exposing some of the vested interests in perpetuating the exploitation of vulnerable migrant workers, including those in forced labour. However, it is only by contributing to a corpus of knowledge and information, and talking publicly about the issues that much further de-ideologising will be possible. Further alliances of research collaborations like ours with the migrant activist organisations will be needed to advance this agenda. Indeed at a dissemination event we invited a speaker from the Migrant Rights Network and we have maintained links here to advocate further.

Conscientisation

The term 'conscientisation', came to prominence from the work of Freire (e.g. 1972) although the concept was not original to him. It embraces a continual process wherein awareness and action

are inseparable: action follows from awareness and creates further action and so on. As critical awareness develops over time, through dialogue and reflection, people's agency increases and their potential for and ability to take action for social justice is enhanced. The importance of conscientisation in liberation psychology lies in its role in helping to forge a strategic alliance between two sets of agents or activists, external catalytic agents (organic intellectuals, activists, committed professionals) and the oppressed groups themselves. (Burton & Kagan, 2009). We cannot claim that our research process enabled the conscientisation of individual participants and exploited migrant workers. However, as discussed above, the distinction between participants and WY members of the research team was a blurred one. We suggest that through engagement with the research and in particular through the dialogue and reflection that took place throughout the research process, WY's understanding of the oppression experienced by migrant workers has enhanced their ability to take action, advocating for and with exploited and vulnerable migrant workers, assisting them to restore their self image and self esteem, and understand the sources of their oppression was enhanced – what Rosado (2007) calls 'consciousness-in-action'

In this paper we have theorized ways in which liberation psychology, provides a useful lens to unpack complex research processes with an under-researched group, undocumented workers, whose lives typically remain under the radar. Perhaps there is never a perfect enactment of 'Liberation Psychology' but it is possible to take a liberation perspective in research and action and this article has illustrated some ways in which this was possible here.

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