

# A Story from the Margin

ZORYANA PSHYK

---

## **Abstract**

*This paper draws on narrative inquiry research: an epistolary autoethnography from a daughter to her mother written to communicate a story of powerlessness and oppression and an immense desire for liberation. The researcher sought to make meaning from her personal experience and to understand the impact of the Direct Provision System on her life. The research was undertaken as part of a Master's Degree in Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University. The researcher reflects on her search for freedom through the power of support and the solidarity of local community, and through the life-changing experience of adult education and learning.*

**Keywords:** Asylum Seeker, Letters, Epistolary Autoethnography, Subjectivity, Praxis, Learning, Education, Generative Themes, Conscientization, Disorienting Dilemma

## **Snapshot of the Letter 'The Women'**

Dear Mamusya!

Just left my friend's house after a lovely chat about us, and kids, and life... and I thought I will tell you a bit about the wonderful women I have met in Ireland, who "brought me up", supported me and stayed with me in solidarity all those years I had been living in direct provision and beyond...

I was really lucky, Mum, to meet the most incredible women in Ireland, whom I can call indeed my tribe. Some of them you have met, some – not. I don't even know, if I will ever be able to explain how important these women were in the becoming of who I am now... So, meet my tribe, Mamusya.

There are women who I call my "Irish Mummies". They have taken the role, that would have been fulfilled by you, Mamusya, if I was living back home. I am very lucky to have them in my life.

I have met Bernie when she came up to the services she worked in to find out about recognition of my qualifications from back home in my first year in direct provision. We had Irish coffee in pubs and restaurants. Bernie taught me Irish culture. She explained to me the nuances of phrases and proverbs, and I told her similar proverbs in Ukrainian. We had long chats about similarities of Ukrainian and Irish languages – how picturesque and rich both languages are... We talked about our childhood memories – so different yet so similar... I still can talk to her about anything in the world! We dreamt my dreams together... about moving out of direct provision centre... being free... She gave me a straw to hold on to, when I was drowning... She drove me with children to Wicklow to see lambs in Springs. She hugged me with her whole heart... She gave me Hope... (Pshyk, Z. 2019a. *Letter 5. The Women*, 10 May).

### **Learning to Read the World**

To the oppressed,  
and to those who suffer with them,  
and fight at their side  
(Freire, 1996, p.5).

My first reading of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1996) happened when I was still living in Direct Provision (DP). In Freire I found an ally who had a more precise understanding of my day-to-day struggles than anyone ever did. Even though the context in which his philosophy was born was distant from me by more than forty years and thousands of kilometres, it was strikingly applicable to my experience of oppression in the context of the Direct Provision System (DPS). Just like bell hooks (2014, p.46), I felt I ‘deeply identified with the marginalized peasants Freire speaks about’ and just like her I did not have a political language to name my world.

Even though Freire recognised the subject position of those ‘who suffer the gravest weight of oppressive forces’ (hooks, 2014, p.53), it is important to assert that he failed to address gender-specific oppression. hooks and Mayo criticise Freire for ‘not acknowledging the specific gendered realities of oppression and exploitation’ (hooks, 2014, p.53) and for not ‘addressing gender, race and sexuality’ (Mayo, 1999, p.113). So, when engaging in an exploration of

oppression, it is important to be aware of how it can be experienced from the female perspective in patriarchal structures and to be aware of the positioning of female experience in the liberatory paradigm. However, as a woman, an educator, and now as a researcher, I deeply value Freire's regret in *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994, p.55) of not addressing 'the discrimination against women, expressed and committed by sexist discourses' and his appeal for us to reject sexist ideology, 'which necessarily involves the re-creation of language.'

As an adult educator and through my involvement in local community groups and networks, I had an opportunity to share my story of living in the DP. It was a fragmented storytelling, embedded in the process of facilitating learning with youth and community groups and with learning communities in Adult, Secondary and Higher Education. Storytelling helped me to feel vulnerable and empowered at the same time. I felt vulnerable because, every time I share my story, I am giving a little bit of myself to the world and what is going to happen with the story I told is out of my control. I feel empowered because more people can learn and change their understanding and perception about asylum seekers.

The experiences of people are not detached from context. They are being created in a historical context in a society that has a political agenda and power in relation to humanity. Having experienced life in the DP, I have come to realise that life experiences are like funnels which squeeze humans into understanding the world in a particular way. They shape who we are, our relation to the world and to those who share the world with us. Our life experiences are important ways of knowing and understanding the world. This epistemological stance is congruent with poststructuralist feminism and forms my ontological position in relation to the world. Ryan (1997, p.10) indicates that 'feminist poststructuralists recognise identity difference and power differentials' and, along with subjectivity, poststructuralist feminism is concerned with 'discourse, difference, deconstruction.'

Feminist analysis illuminates the importance of subjectivities, the complexities of oppression and its impact on personal experiences. I identify with the critical feminism which is concerned not only with women and their struggle for equality but with all who experience inequality, discrimination, racism, abuse, subordination, marginalisation and structural injustice, whose voices are subjugated in male-dominant societies. These experiences should be viewed and understood in the context of intersectionality, because the concept of life cannot be separated into disjointed strands. Brah and Phoenix (2004, p.76) point out that intersectionality signifies:

The complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axes of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts.

Viewing human struggle through the lens of the above concept highlights the impacts of oppression and helps to unearth the roots of injustice across all avenues with the hope to eliminate it at the core. The significance of intersectionality for this research cannot be underestimated, particularly when listening to the stories of women from all walks of life. Notwithstanding that this research is giving a personal account of oppression in a particular context, understanding the oppression in intersectionality will help to ‘elucidate current entanglements with similar problematics’ (Brah and Phoenix, 2004, p.75).

Often considered a weaker sex in capitalist patriarchal structures (hooks, 2014), women experience multiple dimensions of oppression. Ireland’s history of treating women is far from equal. However, while women outside of the DPS (Direct Provision System) are still battling for equal pay for work, equality in decision making, gender equality in higher education and across wider society, dignity, integrity and an end to gender-based violence (European Commission, 2019), women asylum seekers are excluded from these discourses. Recent reports (Ombudsman, 2018; AkiDwA, 2020) highlight the hegemonic construction of the experiences of women in the DPS. Extraordinarily disadvantaged materially (Ombudsman, 2018), they also have to meet societal expectations fulfilling their roles as mothers and wives. These expectations become an unbearably oppressive burden in places like the DP centres where womanhood is caught up in the male identity of an asylum seeker and therefore becomes invisible.

Navigating between levels of oppression, women turn into shields protecting their children from institutional discrimination (AkiDwA, 2020) and trying to cope with day-to-day discriminative practices against their race, religion (Fitzsimons, 2017a) and worldviews. On the margin of despair, it is difficult for a woman asylum seeker to stay sane in ‘the world that is not inclusive of you’ (hooks, 2014), where oppression in all its forms is supported by institutions and social structures.

### **Story of the Story-ing**

The data for this research was created via the method of epistolary autoethnography, namely reflecting on personal experience through writing

letters. Letter-writing has been previously used as a research method for education (Knowles and Cole, 1994, p.27; Ciuffetelli Parker, 2011a, b). The innovation of using letters for this research is that the letters were written intentionally to express personal experience for the purpose of the research into adult education. Letter-writing was not studied as a research method prior to writing the letters. The method choice was rather accidental, emerging when I posed a question to myself: if I were to give an account of my experience of living in the DP to a person with whom I could be as honest as with myself, who would I tell the story to? The immediate response in my head was: I am going to write letters to my mother.

Letters as a means of storytelling in the first person about one's own life experience is an autoethnographic activity. Ellis (2004, xix) defines autoethnography as a form of research, writing and method that connects the autobiographical and the personal to the cultural and social. This form usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection (Denzin, 2009, p.205). As a form of research, autoethnography 'locates the researcher's deeply personal and emotional experiences as topics in a context related to larger social issues' (Denzin, 1997, p.200 cited in Olesen, 2005, p.254). Caisel and Salvo (2018, p.1) assert that, through its philosophical and narrative orientation, autoethnography 'rehumanizes the abstract speaking position of the political subject'.

Critics often accuse autoethnography of being 'merely solipsistic' (Patai, 1994 cited in Olesen, 2005, p.254), biased, self-indulgent and introspective (Atkinson, 1997; Coffey, 1999), self-serving and 'navel-gazing' (Diversi and Moreira, 2016, p.190), mostly because in qualitative research objectivity is equated with masculinity and subjectivity with femininity. However, Freire (1996, p.32) emphasises that 'one cannot conceive of objectivity without subjectivity; subjectivity and objectivity should be in constant dialectical relationship'. Denzin (2009, p.507) points out that all qualitative texts are biased as they are 'reflecting the play of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and culture, suggesting that so-called objective interpretations are impossible'. It is important 'to develop an understanding of subjectivity as a powerful aspect of the human condition, rather than an inadequate, deficient opposite of objectivity' (Connolly, 2013, p.15).

### **Generative Themes of the Letters**

Freire (1996) asserts that in order to reach conscientization people must first investigate their 'thematic universe' (p.103) which can be revealed through generative themes – the themes and the issues which affect people's lives and which, through reflection, 'generate energy and hope' (Hope and Timmel, 2014, p.17). The feelings and emotions that accompany the process of their generation play a crucial role in motivating the transformation of our world. As Hope and Timmel (2014, p.17) write, 'suppressed feelings contribute to a sense of powerlessness and apathy but if we tap into them, people can unearth new life for themselves.'

Practically, the generative themes are drawn out in 'cultural circles' (Freire, 1996, p.45) by engaging in personal reflection through problem-posing material. Through dialogue, 'the issues which the local people speak about with excitement, hope, fear, anxiety or anger' (Hope and Timmel, 2014, p.8) reveal the generative themes. The energy that surrounds these themes are a lifegiving energy for planning action for radical change. Therefore, generative themes are integral to emancipatory pedagogy. Garcia (1974, p.69) explains that to investigate generative themes means 'to investigate man's thinking about reality and man's action upon reality, which is his praxis.' The first theme that emerged in the letters was food, unveiling the issue of food provision and the prohibition of cooking. Further themes emerged as follows: Right to Work, Discrimination, After Direct Provision, The Women, Education Path.

Garcia (1974, p.69) explains:

Opting for the interpretation that sees themes as linguistic representation of affective and cognitive responses and of the situations which elicit such responses does not mean that themes are entirely subjective. Thought and language exist always in reference to reality.

The circumstances current to the letters are quite explicit and, as pointed out above, are not entirely subjective. The letters tap into the realities and stories of other people and create a dynamic narrative which is comparative and relational. Furthermore, the main themes generate myriads of other themes which at times interact with their opposite, such as inclusion/exclusion, oppression/freedom and so forth.

As contextualised material, which is ‘historical, relational and processual’ (Denzin, 2009, p.109) interpretive material, the letters illuminate the phenomenon of subjective lived experience. Denzin (2009, p.109) points out that the stories should be connected to ‘larger institutional, group, and cultural contexts, including written texts and other systems of discourse’. Herman and Vervaeck (2005, p.8) highlight that narrative text always functions in context, and, therefore, context is a very important ingredient of narrative, as it ‘always has to do with ideology’. Freirean critical pedagogy is deeply concerned with understanding social context and historical milieu. The contexts that were explicitly elaborated on in the letters and researched in the academic literature referenced are the following:

1. The context of the DPS
2. The theoretical emergence of the DPS
3. The context of being a woman in Ireland
4. The context of a woman living in the DPS

These layers of contextualised oppression created multiple narratives of oppression which shaped the experience that has been researched.

Phenomenology is a rich source of data but appears to be difficult to analyse due to myriads of emerging meanings. Due to this process, other rich generative themes had to be abandoned to make data a manageable source for producing meanings. For the process of objectively analysing the data and distancing from the ever-colonising ‘I’ of the letters, I situated myself in the objective position of the researcher to ‘suspend my subjectivity’ temporarily and ‘assumed the attitude of a disinterested observer’ (Scott and Usher, 1996, p.21) by referring to myself in the analysis with my first name, Zoryana.

As the research was not traditional in its form, the letters were considered findings. The analysis of the themes was carried out according to what Denzin (2009, p.108-109) terms ‘interpretive interactionism’, where the focus is on ‘those life experiences (epiphanies) that radically alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their life projects’. Contrary to the moments of crisis that emerged during analysis in Denzin’s account of interpretive interactionism, this research is driven to moments of transformation through education and learning.

It is difficult to capture with precision the learning that can occur in a person's life as well as how one experience of learning leads to another, as it is a perpetually evolving process. However, the threads of transformative learning were vividly evident in the data of this research project, signifying disorienting dilemmas and capturing the empowering elements of personal transformation.

The learning was analysed from two positions – learning in formal spaces and learning in informal spaces. Here, formal refers to educational settings, while the informal encompasses day-to-day life and the spaces that can be deemed informal. This separation of contexts was done consciously in order to help reveal the deeper meaning of the experiences. The following themes emerged through analysis of the learning: Cooking as an Act of Resistance, Fostering Resistance Through Learning Solidarity and Learning for Liberation. The subthemes are elaborated on below.

### **Cooking as an Act of Resistance**

#### *Cooking as Learning*

Not being allowed to cook, especially in structures like the DPS, had taken the possibility of engaging in creative praxis away from Zoryana. Freire points out that creativity is crucial for the human 'drive to search' and 'restlessness' (1996, p.42) and that a lack of creative power suppresses life and pushes the embodiment of oppression further. For Zoryana, the practice of cooking covertly as a means of providing nutrition for children becomes a process of reclaiming her identity as a mother, which entails certain expectations of this role in patriarchal structures, including cooking for her family. This creates a struggle for Zoryana to fulfil her expectations of herself, of her family and of society, as a process inherent to this role is being taken away from her.

Furthermore, cooking is an indigenous way of learning and a way of passing on customs, traditions and culture. Taking away this abundant source of learning opens up a colonial narrative of the oppressors' culture, turning asylum seekers into colonial subjects. As an instrument of domination, the prohibition of cooking in the DPS becomes a cultural invasion, which 'penetrates the cultural context of another group', here a culturally diverse community of asylum seekers. As Freire (1996, p.152) highlights, 'in disrespect of the latter's potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression'. Taking away the possibility of cooking as an indigenous way of learning breaks the connection in 'intergenerational learning' (Murphy, 2012, p.53) which leads to the fragmentation of authentic cultural identity:



Over the last Christmas I have got to cook a lot, and especially traditional food, that we cooked with grandma for the Christmas Eve's supper – kutya, varenyky with wild mushrooms, with cherries, with sour cabbage; lent holubtsi, mushroom sauce, uzvar... It brought a lot of wonderful memories, but a lot of sadness as well. Tasting granny's food was like an explosion of taste in the mouth and the happiness in the heart. And not only because she was a good cook. It's because the food she prepared was shared with sisters and brothers, and cousins, and neighbours. All of us were sitting together at the table, and the food was a symbol of unity of the extended family. It was a symbol of gathering and learning from each other – an intergenerational learning. It was a symbol connecting past and present... It was a symbol of relationships we had; of the connection we had kept over the years from a mother to a daughter. Mine has been broken... (Pshyk, Z. 2018a. *Letter 1. Food*, 14 August).

#### *Cooking as Learning Resistance*

On the one hand, the total provision of food is experienced as safety, but on the other hand, it becomes a tool for governing the human body and a tool of oppression. The use of discipline and punishment (Foucault, 1995) is an attempt to govern the food-body relationship.

Going downstairs and line up for breakfast, go back upstairs, go downstairs and line up for lunch... Going downstairs for dinner... and Storing, cooking or having food in the rooms was prohibited...being late for breakfast means no breakfast (Pshyk, Z. 2018a. *Letter 1. Food*, 14 August).

This regulation produces 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1995, p.138) and reinforces a 'culture of silence' (Freire, 1996, p.15), creating people without will. This completely opposes the ongoing discourses in society on healthy eating which are especially evident in the light of the Healthy Food Made Easy campaign, a national programme which aims to help people learn about healthy eating and healthy cooking in a friendly, relaxed atmosphere (Share and Share and Geraghty, 2009).

The following quotation illustrates the presence of 'epigenetic transgenerational trauma' (Rechavi, Hourì-Ze'evi, Anava, Goh, Kerk, Hannon and Hobert, 2014, p.1) which concerns DNA recording memories of starvation during the famine and the passing of this traumatic information to the survivors' descendants:

...During our sessions we talked about different issues and things, that bothered me. I think, central to all those sessions was FOOD... The counsellor noticed it as well... I thought a lot, why is it so... Then in November, during the Holodomor Memorial, I had read an article, which was explaining how experiencing starvation during the famine is “recorded” by the human genes and passed down to the generations of descendants... it all came together for me... I remember grandma telling me about the famine...she should not have remembered; she was only four years old... but she remembered the feeling of hunger... 1932-1933... Great Famine... 10 million of Ukrainian people perished as victims of death inflicted by starvation under Stalin’s regime... people were killed for a tiny seed of wheat...genocide through food ...food...was a means of control... means for survival... (Pshyk, Z. 2018a. *Letter 1. Food*, 14 August).

This bodily memory evokes intergenerational trauma for Zoryana and creates anxiety relating to the inability to have control over food preparation, intake times and cooking. The analysis reveals the embodiment of intergenerational oppression for Zoryana, as a Ukrainian and as a woman of a particular family line. This intergenerational oppression is evoked through bodily memory and the prohibition of cooking in the DP, echoing hooks’ (2014) assertion about the fragmentation of the person’s wholeness in patriarchal structures and the traumatic experiences of domination.

The statement ‘I had chosen to survive! To survive and withstand the oppression I had experienced through control of the food’ (Pshyk, Z. 2018a. *Letter 1. Food*, 14 August) affirms a willpower to refuse acceptance of the situation and proceeding with cooking, through the fear of being caught by the hand. Scott (1985, p.33) substantiates that ‘where institutionalised politics is formal, overt, concerned with systematic, de jure change, everyday resistance is informal, often covert, and concerned largely with immediate, de facto gains’. The decision to start cooking covertly in Zoryana’s case becomes an act of ‘everyday resistance’ (Scott, 1985, p.33). Thus, cooking as a practice of everyday resistance becomes an initial steppingstone for further resisting oppressive patriarchal structures as well as resisting transgenerational oppression.

### **Fostering Resistance through Learning Solidarity**

#### *Learning to Mother without my Mother*

Becoming a mother is a process which takes a lot of learning about oneself as a woman and embracing the new identity of a mother. For Zoryana, it comes

with the struggle of fulfilling the expectations she has of herself as a mother in the DP and in society and the expectations and responsibilities that patriarchal society has placed on her. Being in tune with the little children and providing for all of their physical and emotional needs becomes a hard task. There is also a profound sense of loss linked to her mother's distance. This can be felt in the memories that are connecting the present with the past and that leave Zoryana wondering how mothering would have been different if her mother were near. However, embracing the identity of being a mother puts her on the path of ongoing learning:

I had to learn a lot about babies, - naturally, as a mother you need to learn a lot in a very quick pace, because babies are developing and grow very fast, and as a mother, you need to be in tune with each milestone of theirs. A role of a mother involves many professions, - you are a teacher, a nurse, - even a doctor, a counsellor, a cleaner, a cook, a launder, a photographer, a manager, a strategic planner, an accountant, a nutritionist, a hairdresser, - you name it! But most important, you are a carer, a nurturer, a storyteller, a memories-keeper, a hugger, a love-giver, a listener, a healer, a protector, an inventor, an idea-generator, a dreamer, a creator, - a life giver... (Pshyk, Z. 2019b. *Letter 6. Education Path*, 15 June).

***Learning to mother with the community of women*** in the DP centre brings a sense of solidarity and affirmation to the new role and prompts the birth of agency by creating a learning space, the Mother and Toddler group, for the children in the DP centre:

A few of us have organised ourselves and started our own Mother and Toddler group. We planned activities for children of two age groups, shared responsibilities in organising play times, facilitating activities, cleaning the playroom before and after the play, making coffees and teas. It was our little world, which was very enjoyable. We were looking forward to those days, hmmm, especially, when it was your turn to sit back and drink coffee (Pshyk, Z. 2019b. *Letter 6. Education Path*, 15 June).

This shows that the collective weakness expressed through the praxis of critical reflection and action grows into a collective strength, which is a goal of Freire's solidarity (Freire, 1996).

***Unlearning institutionalisation***, explained as ‘gripping with the new reality and learning to adjust to the living in an “open” society... and trying to fit into new frame of what my life must be like’, is in fact the process of unlearning oppression ‘to shed the peels and layers, that direct provision has covered me with’ (Pshyk, Z. 2019b. *Letter 6. Education Path*, 15 June).

This process is identified with the trauma of losing a familiar space and learning and knowing how to deal with the familiar circumstances of oppression – ‘my inner world was falling apart’ (Pshyk, 2019b). Living in an ‘open’ society is experienced as a disorienting dilemma and brings a huge challenge to ontological and epistemological positions. It comes with a realisation that the ‘open’ society is not as open as expected, and that the desired freedom from behind the walls of the DP centre does not exist: ‘I was being crushed by the realisation, that the freedom I was dreaming of for so many years while in direct provision, in fact, doesn’t exist’ (Pshyk, Z. 2019b. *Letter 6. Education Path*, 15 June). This revelation comes with pain and creates a traumatic experience for Zoryana. Furthermore, the desire to fit in means that there is a struggle with a new identity, which is still unknown and only in the process of forming. Nevertheless, the loss of the asylum seeker’s identity brings an experience of grieving.

***Learning from failure*** is a painful process filled with self-doubt and anxiety. In the culture of achievement, which is deeply inherent to human nature through the banking model of education (Freire, 1996), it is unacceptable to fail, especially in education. Capitalist society does not recognise failure, therefore, failing comes with guilt, shame and anxiety. These feelings are an impact of self-deprecating behaviour (Freire, 1996), which stems from oppression in patriarchal structures: ‘for a while I thought of myself as a complete failure. Only about a year later, when writing a speech... I suddenly realised – It was not a failure! Not at all! It was just a part of a learning process!’ (Pshyk, Z. 2019b. *Letter 6. Education Path*, 15 June). Accepting this experience as a learning experience is empowering and brings a sense of liberation. hooks (1984) explains that institutionalisation is an internalisation of the domination of patriarchal structures. She asserts that the culture we live in is ‘the one institutionalised sphere of power’ (hooks, 1984, p.20) which impacts all levels of society and is being reinforced through social institutions, including the family. She argues that there is a need to learn self-acceptance, which is hard to achieve in existing structures.

*Learning from my mother* is a theme that emerges through Zoryana's childhood memories, which are being unearthed and intertwined with memories from the DP. Her mother's break away from modern-day slavery for the sake of her daughter's education has had a profound impact on the meaning of education in Zoryana's life. This so-called slavery is enforced through the traditional expectations of hard work and obedience from a daughter-in-law within the patriarchal structures of society. Another important experience of her mother's is the experience of going back to education as an adult and refusing to submit to demands of bribery for entrance to college. Yet Zoryana emphasises that she agrees to pay whatever it takes for her education, even though she has no means and puts herself into conscious debt. It shows how Zoryana yields to the meritocratic narrative of neoliberal discourse and how her mother is able to resist to the point of refusing to study. This difference in their experiences is astounding.

*Learning with the community of women* inside and outside of the DP is especially evident in the letter *The Women* (Pshyk, Z. 2019a. Letter 5. *The Women*, 10 May), which shows respect to women's struggles and tells the story of receiving immense support from 'Irish Mothers, Irish Sisters and Women Heroes':

But we stayed... hand in hand... shoulder to shoulder... We supported each other... We have shared bread and milk... happiness and sorrow... We resisted... We fought... We cried... We hugged... and weren't letting anyone to break us! We walked the road together... We dragged each other through the sameness of the days and nights... And if there were no strengths in our bodies to walk, we were lifting each other and carrying through...

These women are remarkable! ... They educated me! They showed me what is diversity, and the wealth of cultures we have in this world! Living with these women as a community gave me an understanding and a privilege to experience their traditions and learn their customs. It gave me an understanding of their lives, and connected my life with theirs, as we have been living through the same struggle...

They have taught me to stand back from my bias and treat people equally, no matter who they are! They have taught me to see a person – holistically – through life experiences which shape and change our characters, change our perception about others, change our relation to other people and how we become who we are...

These women have humanised me... (Pshyk, Z. 2019a. *Letter 5. The Women*, 10 May).

When women come together, they engage in discussions that are paving the way to overcoming a 'culture of silence' (Freire, 1996, p.32) and fostering a critical reflection on their experiences created by patriarchal structures. Freire emphasises that having trust in people and an ability to engage in their struggles will create an authentic comradeship which, in its plenitude, will become an act of love and will be true solidarity in its *praxis* (1996, p.32).

Mezirow (2000, p.134) argued that a new meaning, born from the transformed structure of assumptions, will be tested through engagement in 'discourse' – a 'dialogue devoted to searching for a common understanding and assessment of the justification of an interpretation or belief', which can occur in one-to-one group relationships, in community groups or in formal and informal education settings. Through repeating the cyclical process of action and reflection, women reach 'conscientization' (Freire, 1996, p.36), an ability to critically understand their reality and recognise the social and political structures that oppress them. The solidarity of women clearly did not lead to emancipation in Zoryana's case, but certainly fostered the development of agency and personal empowerment both in friendships and in a collective empowerment within the community in DP. This 'unity in resistance and struggles', hooks (1984, p.38) states, is a 'deeply political feminist unity and a struggle against the oppression of patriarchal structures which we all experience'. This unity makes Zoryana's personal experience less of a burden and empowers her to resist daily oppression. The solidarity that she experiences with the women in DP is a deeply humanising process. The site of oppression becomes a site of possibility for liberation by resisting submission to oppression.

### **Learning for Liberation**

#### *Learning to Speak*

Apart from accessing Western knowledge, learning English opens up the possibility of engaging in the practice of dialogue, which creates an opportunity for Zoryana to reveal the world around her and to engage in further learning. This significant revelation comes upon reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1996), which gives a name to the experience of oppression. This transformative experience raises the question of why the word 'oppression' was not learnt in English class and highlights the importance of critical literacy which creates a connection between 'reading the word and the world' and

'approaches subjectivity through the development of *conscientization*' (Freire, 1996, p.19). Learning literacy has the potential to be 'a cultural action for freedom' (Freire, 2000). However, in Zoryana's instance, learning the English language became a tool for fully engaging with and integrating into the culture of the oppressor, namely the culture of wider society, which, by allowing for oppression to exist in the DPS, becomes the oppressor itself.

***Learning creativity*** is associated with the experience of feeling like 'becoming a God' (Pshyk, Z. 2019b. *Letter 6. Education Path*, 15 June), and this revelation explains the repetitive return to this empowering experience. Creative power is a life-giving force which prompts 'the drive to search, to restlessness' (Freire, 1996, p.42). Engagement in the process of creativity unveils and reproduces creative power. Thus, learning creativity becomes a process of overcoming alienation which is constructed by the 'prescriptions' (Freire, 1996, p.133), namely, the regulations of the DPS. Developing creativity extends human repertoires of organic intellectual engagement, as Connolly (2013, p.1) points out. Furthermore, practicing creativity creates conditions for having 'the capacity to exercise agency, while, at the same time, resisting discourse and social practises that are subjugating', as Larkin (2016, p. 17) conveys. Learning creativity moves outside of the spaces of Community Education and outside of the walls of the DP centre and becomes a practice of creativity and friendship which brings colours to the everyday reality of the dark room Zoryana lives in with her family.

Creativity is central to adult education, and particularly to Freirean pedagogy. Thus, this theme includes learning creativity for working with groups, from jewellery-making classes to creating and using problem-posing material, which is central to creating a dialogue and to eliciting generative themes with the groups, which unveil real issues that people experience. So, learning creativity in Zoryana's case moves over time from learning to create to practicing creativity with the groups in adult education. It becomes a life-giving force for overcoming personal alienation and fostering creativity in others.

***Leaning for liberation*** is the theme which encapsulates all the learning that leads to developing a critical awareness of the complexities of societal structures and fosters Zoryana's resistance to these structures, as well as leading to her engagement in facilitating Freirean pedagogy. Reconnecting with her cultural identity during the intercultural sessions; re-discovering her leadership skills; experiencing learning about power; realising that power can be shifted and

resisted; and learning the 'creative' toolbox of a facilitator working with groups in a Freirean approach are only some of the transformative learning experiences with Partners Training for Transformation (TFT) recalled in the letters. Fascinated with 'the practical application to the Freirean pedagogy' (Partners TFT, 2013), and with Partners TFT, Zoryana starts her journey as a facilitator.

Learning the word 'facilitator' and experiencing the facilitation of creating a shared knowledge; learning the word 'oppression' when reading Freire for the course; learning philosophy, sociology and feminist studies; and becoming a qualified tutor are only some of the significant experiences that occurred during the courses with the Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University. What the experiences with both organisations have in common is that they are truly transformative, not only because of the learning gained during the courses, but because of the people who facilitated the education. The significance of the solidarity of the tutors/facilitators, their trust in students and their humanity, and their understanding of human struggle and the facilitation of critical inquiry into the human experiences and into the world, turn these spaces of learning into spaces for experiencing democracy and freedom for Zoryana, as illustrated in the data. Freire (1996, p.60) emphasises that the 'real humanist can be identified more by his trust in the people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favour without that trust'. Hence, the experience of education is significant not only because of the learning it offers but because of the people who facilitate the learning, adhering to the adult education values of respect, dignity, equality and justice.

The process of repeatedly going back to education is empowering and disempowering at the same time. It is empowering due to its ability to give Zoryana hope and strength to resist oppressive structures. It is disempowering because, while she was seeking spaces of freedom, the power structures of the DPS remained the same, with her family remaining within these structures. Thus, the question of the longevity of transformative learning arises, as opposed to the temporary transformative empowerment of an individual within the existing power structures. Transformative learning allows for transformation within certain boundaries but does not actually allow the individual to reach emancipation (Tailor and Cranton, 2013). Personal transformation does not allow for social change, as social change needs a collective engagement in the praxis of freedom. Otherwise, it is merely an individual empowerment, which operates 'as a subtle form of self-control' (Inglis, 1998, p.13), as in Zoryana's case within the structures of the DPS. This statement challenges the notion of



emancipation being attained through personal transformation (Mezirow, 1990).

The quotation ‘I must go further; I must progress; I must achieve; I must succeed... because if not, – I am a failure’ (Pshyk, Z. 2019b. *Letter 6. Education Path*, 15 June) clearly portrays a belief in the ‘individualist discourse that claims people can lift themselves out of poverty through their own actions’ (Fitzsimons, 2017b, p.42). This individualism, Fitzsimons (2017b, p.42) asserts, is ‘an important cornerstone in neoliberalism’ which is ‘increasingly cemented in hegemonic logic through the notion of social agency’.

There is a sense of grieving for lost time in the DPS which heightens the game of meritocracy or what Freire (1996, p.157) calls a manipulation by the ‘culture of achievement’ which is determined by the ‘culture of domination’ (1996, p.158). Internalisation of this narrative is the driving force behind Zoryana’s actions. Furthermore, her conscious decision to stop mourning her culture and ‘earn’ her way out of DP through education ends up in her committing ‘cultural suicide’ (Brookfield, 1995 cited in Taylor and Cranton, 2013, p.40) which ‘can result from people moving away from their communities and cultures through transformative learning’. ‘... Integration comes with blood and tears’... (Pshyk, Z. 2018a. *Letter 1. Food*, 14 August). Zoryana’s statement reaffirms Taylor and Cranton’s (2013, p.40) conclusion that:

the phases of transformation involve pain, discontent, guilt and shame. The event or events that precipitate transformative learning are often traumatic but supposedly lead to positive outcome.

Contrary to the last point, the conscious decision to block part of Zoryana’s life experiences and culture in order to integrate into society created ongoing issues of anxiety and depression. It might have happened partly because the learning spaces she had been attending were not addressing her cultural needs and were reinforcing the culture of the ruling class. It could have been due to adult education not being culturally inclusive and not catering for a diversity of knowledge through intercultural curriculums (Zilliacus, 2009) as well as undermining world experiences as a source for enriching and diversifying Western knowledge.

Connolly (2013, p.14) points out that women and other subordinate groups develop their identity through feedback from their peers. Seeing herself through the eyes of society as an asylum seeker, Zoryana has internalised the dominant cultural norms of society. This ‘disjointed sense of identity’ (Connolly, 2013,

p.14) prompted her to deny the validity of her own experience prior to the DPS and turned her into a self-deprecating being. Zoryana is grieving because of her fragmented identity and uses education as a vehicle for reclaiming her identity prior to the DPS and for freeing herself from the internalised colonisation inflicted on her during her years in the DPS.

***Learning to find my voice.*** Through transformative learning and the praxis of conscientization, Zoryana becomes an adult educator. Through her work and volunteering she resists submitting to discourses of power and works to change the dominant narrative about asylum seekers by creating and sharing counter-narratives:

We are strong and smart people. We want to fully contribute to society. Don't steal our life in the dark rooms of the direct provision. Don't steel (sic) our hopes and dreams. We are Humans... Have a closer look. We are more alike than not. We are more connected than not. We all belong to this Planet... You and me ... (Pshyk, Z. 2019b. *Letter 6. Education Path*, 15 June).

Her voice grows stronger through the course of the letters. Through the years of education and transformation she develops agency for herself, for her family and for the people who need solidarity like she needed it in her position on the margin of society. Her experience of oppression and subjugation carved her into who she is now. She facilitates education that is meaningful, congruent with people's experiences and that, through reflection and action, leads to conscientization. This is a praxis of personal radical transformation in solidarity with others which does not move her *From* [the] *Margin* to [the] *Centre* (hooks, 1984) but keeps her grounded in the roots of the community as an ex-asylum seeker with other asylum seekers and others on the margin of society, and unites her in solidarity with their struggles with hope for the emancipation for all.

### **Conclusion**

Researching subjectivity is a complex process. It allows for an exploration of deeper meanings, but it is emotionally demanding and hurtful. Writing epistolary autoethnography helped me to engage in a critical reflection on my experience of being an asylum-seeker and on my journey of becoming an adult educator. The writing became a process of knowledge acquisition which enabled me to reconnect with my sense of self and created a fertile ground for deeper meanings to emerge through 'reading', understanding and 'naming' the world.

This research proved that epistolary autoethnography is a method of research appropriate for the field of adult education and for eliciting subjectivities from the margin of society. Stories elicited from the margin will challenge the dominant discourses of power. Not only will they reveal the effects that these discourses have on personal experiences, they will also create counter-narratives for the greater possibility of engaging in conversations about the oppressive realities of people and the intersectionality of experiences. This research challenged assumptions about the meaning of learning and adult education. Engagement in education and the richness of learning from the family, peers and the diverse community created an abundant experience of empowerment, solidarity and resistance to multiple structures of oppression. If placed along an imaginary continuum of praxis, these experiences are a persistent move towards emancipation.

Through the analysis came the devastating understanding that emancipation is not a task that can be achieved alone. Transformative learning is a move along the continuum of learning that is closer to radical social transformation, but this transformation can only occur when the praxis of conscientization extends to collective action. However, the solidarity that the women in DP are able to foster in the face of patriarchal structures gives hope for this emancipatory change. This process is growing through emancipatory education that seeks to bring about conscientization from engagement in the praxis of solidarity.

Despite the research reaching its aims, there are unavoidable limitations. Subjectivity is congruent with personal experience. Therefore, to make meaning of the subjectivities of many asylum seekers, there is a need to either reframe the approach to the research or to extend the timeframe, allowing for the myriads of stories to be told. This study has explicitly asserted that personal experience is constructed by political systems of domination and political discourses of power. Thus, this research may be deemed 'an act of counterhegemonic resistance' (hooks, 2012, p.5). Only through the vehicle of feminist critical thinking and emancipatory education can women push boundaries and transgress to liberation, dismantling male dominance and challenging certain aspects of culture, as well as the governmental policies which colonise their existence in the 'imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' (hooks, 1997, p.10).

This research is being shared with the hope that it prompts critical questioning, awareness, and solidarity amongst the cohort of adult educators who hold

the power to educate for change in the treatment of people who are seeking protection and those who remain on the margin. The data and the findings of this research may be used by teachers, educators and facilitators in the fields of adult, community and higher education as problem-posing material or as a starter for dialogue on the topic of asylum seekers. It is important to remember that at a time of uncertainty in the global discourses of power everybody is a potential asylum-seeker.

### References

- AkiDwA. 2020. *Let's Talk: Mental Health Experiences of Migrant Women*. Dublin: AkiDwA. [Online]. [Accessed 23 February 2020]. Available from: <https://akidwa.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/LetsTalk2.pdf>
- Atkinson, P. 1997. Narrative turn or blind alley? *Qualitative Health Research*. 7(3), pp.325-344.
- Brah, A. and Phoenix, A. 2013. *Ain't I A Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality*. [Online]. Virtual Commons: Bridgewater State University. [Accessed 11 October 2018]. Available from: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol5/iss3/8/>.
- Ceisel, C. and Salvo, J. 2017. Autoethnographic Responses to the Political. *Qualitative Inquiry*. 24 (5), pp.307-308.
- Ciuffetelli Parker, D. 2011b. Related literacy narratives: Letters as a narrative inquiry method in teacher education. In: Kitchen, J., Ciuffetelli, D., and Pushor, D. eds. *Advances in Research on Teaching*. Bingley: Emerald Group publishing, pp.131-149.
- Coffey, A. 1999. *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity*. London: SAGE.
- Connolly, B. 2013. *Theorising Creative Critical Pedagogy: The Art of Politicized Agency*. [Online]. Maynooth: MURAL. [Accessed 3 January 2019]. Available from: [http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/7646/1/BC\\_theorising%20creative%20critical%20pedagogy.pdf](http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/7646/1/BC_theorising%20creative%20critical%20pedagogy.pdf)
- Denzin, N. 2009. *Qualitative Inquiry Under Fire: Toward a New Paradigm Debate*. Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press.
- Diversi, M. and Moreira, C. 2016. *Between Talk: Decolonizing Knowledge Production, Pedagogy, and Praxis*. [Online]. [Accessed 1 October 2018]. Available from: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
- European Commission. 2019. *The EU and Irish Women*. [Online]. [Accessed 10 April 2019]. Available from: [https://ec.europa.eu/ireland/node/684\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/ireland/node/684_en)
- Fitzsimons, C. 2017a. *Adult education responses to the 'othering' of Muslim identity: Perspectives from Ireland*. [Online]. Maynooth: MURAL. [Accessed 15 January

- 2019]. Available from: [http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/9007/1/CF\\_adult%20education%20reponses.pdf](http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/9007/1/CF_adult%20education%20reponses.pdf)
- Fitzsimons, C. 2017b. *Community Education and Neoliberalism. Philosophies, Practices and Policies in Ireland*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, M. 1995. *Discipline and punish*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Freire, P. 1994. *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York and London: Continuum.
- Freire, P. 1996. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin Books.
- Freire, P. 2000. *Pedagogy of the Heart*. New York: Continuum.
- Garcia, S.J.A. 1974. *Generative Themes: A Critical Examination of Their Nature and Function in Paulo Freire's Educational Model*. Master's thesis, Loyola University Chicago: Loyola eCommons. [Online]. [Accessed 15 January 2019]. Available from: [https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc\\_theses/2683](https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_theses/2683)
- Herman, L. and Vervaeck, B. 2005. *Handbook of Narrative Analysis (Frontiers of narrative)*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- hooks, b. 1984. *Feminist Theory from Margin to Centre*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- hooks, b. 1997. *Cultural Criticism and Transformation*. MEF: Challenging Media. [Online]. [Accessed 23 January 2019]. Available from: <https://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Bell-Hooks-Transcript.pdf>
- hooks, b. 2014. *Teaching to Transgress*. London: Routledge.
- hooks, b. 2012. *Appalachian elegy*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Hope, A. and Timmel, S. 2014. *Training for Transformation. A Handbook for Community Workers*. London: ITDG Publishing.
- Inglis, T. 1998. A Critical Realist Approach to Emancipation: A Response to Mezirow. *Adult Education Quarterly*. **49** (1), pp. 72–76. [Online]. [Accessed 29 March 2017]. Available from: <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.jproxy.nuim.ie/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=1339283&site=ehost-live>.
- Kitchen, J., Ciuffetelli Parker, D., and Pushor, D., eds. 2011a. *Narrative Inquiries into Curriculum Making in Teacher Education*. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing.
- Knowles, J. and Cole, A. 1994. We're Just like the Beginning Teachers We Study: Letters and Reflections on Our First Year as Beginning Professors. *Curriculum Inquiry*. **24** (1), 27-52. [Online]. [Accessed 13 February 2019]. Available from: <https://www-jstor-org.jproxy.nuim.ie/stable/1180144>
- Larkin, S. 2016. *Community Arts as an Act of Praxis and Resistance*. Master's thesis, Maynooth University. [Online]. [Accessed 15 January 2019]. Available from: <http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/9657>
- Mayo, P. 1999. *Gramsci, Freire, and Adult Education: Possibilities for Transformative*

- Action*. New York: Zed Books.
- McCormack, D. 2019. *Trina chéile: Reflections on journaling in the border country of doctoral research*. [Accessed 3 January 2019]. Available from: <http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/7874>
- Mezirow, J. 1990. Conclusion: Toward transformative learning and emancipatory education. In: Mezirow, J. and Associates. eds. *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning*. San Francisco: Josey-Bass, pp.354-376.
- Mezirow, J. 2000. Learning to Think Like an Adult: Core Concepts of Transformation Theory. In: Merriam, S.B., Caffarella, R. S., and Baumgartner, L. (2007). *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p.134.
- Murphy, C. 2012. *Transferring Knowledge and Life Experience Between Generations: The Potential of Community Based Intergenerational Projects*. Master's thesis, Technological University Dublin. [Online]. [Accessed 11 March 2019]. Available from: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/appamas/37/>
- Olesen, V. 2005. Early Millennial Feminist Qualitative Research. In: Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd edn). New York: Sage Publications, pp.235-278.
- Ombudsman. 2018. *The Ombudsman and Direct Provision: The story so far. A commentary by the Ombudsman*. [Online]. Dublin: Office of the Ombudsman. [Accessed 13 March 2019]. Available from: <https://www.ombudsman.ie/publications/reports/the-ombudsman-and-direct/Direct-Provision-Commentary.pdf>
- Partners Training for Transformation. 2013. *Who we are*. [Online]. [Accessed 25 August 2019]. Available from: <http://www.trainingfortransformation.ie/index.php/who-we-are/who-we-are>
- Pshyk, Z. 2018a. *Letter 1. Food*, 14 August.
- Pshyk, Z. 2019a. *Letter 5. The Women*, 10 May.
- Pshyk, Z. 2019b. *Letter 6. Education Path*, 15 June.
- Rechavi, O., Hourri-Ze'evi, L., Anava, S., Goh, W., Kerk, S., Hannon, G., and Hobert, O. 2014. Starvation-induced transgenerational inheritance of small RNAs in *C. elegans*. *Cell*. **158**(2), pp.277-287.
- Ryan, A. B. 1997. *Feminist Subjectivities: sources for a politicised practice of women's personal development education*. PhD thesis, Maynooth University. [Online]. [Accessed 10 March 2019]. Available from: <http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/5283>
- Scott, D., and Usher, R. 1996. *Understanding Educational Research*. London: Routledge.
- Scott, J. C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Form of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven

and London: Yale University Press.

Share, P., Share, M., and Geraghty, R. 2009. *Healthy Food Made Easy Evaluation*.

[Online]. [Accessed 14 April 2019]. Available from: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281861055\\_Healthy\\_Food\\_Made\\_Easy\\_Evaluation](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281861055_Healthy_Food_Made_Easy_Evaluation)

Taylor, E., and Cranton, P. 2013. *The Handbook of Transformative Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.