

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/31385902>

# Giving Silence a Chance: The Importance of Life Stories for Research on Refugees

Article in *Journal of Refugee Studies* · February 2008

DOI: 10.1093/jrs/fem033 · Source: OAI

CITATIONS

112

READS

506

1 author:



[Halleh Ghorashi](#)

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

98 PUBLICATIONS 1,805 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



PhD project: Developing inclusive spaces for refugees through engaged scholarship [View project](#)



ELITES: Pathways to Success project [View project](#)

## REFUGEE VOICE

---

### Giving Silence a Chance: The Importance of Life Stories for Research on Refugees

HALLEH GHORASHI

*Department of Culture, Organization and Management, Faculty of Social Sciences, De Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1081c, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands*  
h.ghorashi@fsw.vu.nl

In order to capture refugees' experiences and narratives it is necessary to create space within research to be able to notice the untold within the interviews. This article focuses on the ways that Iranian women refugees (in the Netherlands and the United States) narrate their experiences of the past and the present or stay silent when the experiences are too difficult to talk about. Including the moments of silence within the process of analysing the stories has helped the researcher to discover different layers within the interviews. The main argument of this article is that the combination of the life stories method and the comparative nature of the research have especially helped to find out about the different ways in which the past is positioned within the present narratives. The life stories in particular have created the necessary space to listen to the often untold stories of refugees. This has enabled the researcher to go beyond the expressed words in order to understand different layers of expression within the narratives.

Keywords: Iranian women, exile, life stories, trauma, layers of expression, home

In June 1988, I left Iran and came to the Netherlands as a political refugee. I had to leave my home country because of my political involvement with a leftist organization during the Iranian Revolution of 1979. After arriving in the Netherlands, I obtained a degree in Cultural Anthropology, and between 1995 and 2000 did research on life stories of Iranian women in exile. The research was concentrated on the narratives of Iranian women exiles living in the Netherlands and the US (California) and the ways in which they position themselves in the countries they live in at present. The women who were part of this research participated in the Iranian revolution of 1979 within leftist organizations. They left Iran when the years of suppression started after 1981. I listened to the life stories of 20 women in each country. I also did several months of participant observation within the local Iranian

communities to grasp the dynamics that existed in both contexts. The Iranian women interviewed for this study share many common characteristics: they entered both countries before the 1990s and most have a higher education and work in jobs related to their study. Most of the women had obtained the nationality of their new country at the time of the interviews. If not, they had permanent residence permits. The main focus of the comparative research was to understand the impact of their new countries on the ways that they told stories of the past, present, and future.

There were two methodological problems underlying this research. In the first place, as an activist in exile I had a lot in common with the women that I spoke with for the sake of my research. Due to this shared past, the method of participant observation gained a peculiarly succinct turn. The boundary between commitment and distance was constantly shifting. I was so deeply involved with the subject of my research that I continually had to keep shifting the boundary between being an insider and an outsider. In order to be able to explain this, it seemed best not to hide my position as both researcher and activist, but instead to outline this position as visibly as possible. Within this area of tension, I was in fact not only speaking to my fellow country people during this research, but also to people whom I shared a history of suffering with. Since I have elaborated on the method of participant observation elsewhere (Ghorashi 1997, 1999, 2003), I will not focus on this method in this paper.

Secondly, my personal experiences as an asylum-seeker have given me a certain loathing of the type of interviews that are too fast, too purposive, or much too short. During these years I often felt I was being treated like a number or a file. I was blamed for any sentence I did not formulate correctly, or for my 'inappropriate' attitude. All of a sudden, I could be facing a suspicious official who just wants to finish this case and an interpreter who is staring at me inscrutably, translating my passionate story in an indifferent voice. I was certain that both I and the other women who had gone through these procedures, had become thoroughly disturbed by officials reducing our stories to one among others, not doing justice to their 'reality'.

My research would have to take two important factors into account: commitment and time. I was deeply involved with the stories of the women participating in this research, because they dealt with a past that was partly my own. The factor of time was important, not only because of the chronological aspect of the stories, but also due to the fact that each interview should provide enough time to hear out the whole stories, even the moments that were not so easy to talk about. This would convince the women that they had all the time they needed to tell about their life.

This is the reason why for my research I have given preference to life stories, combined with my position as a visible researcher, as a complementary aspect in methodology. Yet, what felt right proved to be right in different ways at the end of the trajectory. When I started the analysis of the research material, I realized an extra dimension of the life stories as a method

for my research. Not only did this method give the other the time and the voice to tell their stories, but it also enabled me to take the time to discover different layers within the stories and to give the silence a chance. In this article I will first present some of the results of my research, after which I will demonstrate how invaluable the life stories method has been to obtain these results.

### **Iranian Women and the 1979 Revolution**

The women in this study were involved in leftist political organizations during the Iranian revolution of 1979. Between 1979 and 1981, Iran experienced a relative 'power vacuum', allowing diverse political groups to be active. This period came to an end after 1981 when the radical Islamists led by Khomeini took power. From this time onwards government took a firm line with the political opposition. Apart from this, the position of women deteriorated seriously just after the revolution. Not only were they forced to wear strictly 'Islamic' dress, but also the Family Protection Law that had been established in the previous period was abolished. This law had, in spite of its shortcomings, provided women with some protection within the family. As a consequence of these measures, women on the left were having a hard time, both because of their political background and because of their being women.

As a result of the political changes in Iran, the women participating in my research had become, as you might say, exiles in their own country. Initially they had experienced freedom and had been allowed to take part in and contribute to the public domain. However, before long they were confronted with violence against themselves and their loved ones. Many of these women witnessed terrible atrocities. Some of them were arrested, others lived in constant fear of getting run in. These women learned life's lessons intensely within a short time: in their own words, within two years they were 'both in paradise and in hell', as hope and joyfulness changed into fear and despair. In short, they became homeless within their homes.

### **Why Choose the Life Story as a Method?**

Choosing the life story as a method has been essential to this research for a number of reasons. Both past experiences as a political activist and the present stories of life as an exile were central aspects of the research. The only method doing justice to this historical dimension of the research, was the life story. If the concept of identity is not seen as a static idea, but rather as a process, the life story becomes one of the few methods that can grasp this process-like character. An identity is not a complete whole but is in fact unsettled, ambiguous, mostly elusive and subject to change in a new context. Still, all this does not mean identity is constantly shifting: despite the fact that identity is a process of 'becoming', there is a certain degree of continuity to it. Past experiences tend to determine (un)conscious preferences of people in the

choices they make. These choices are reconsidered when someone comes into contact with new, often unknown possibilities. This is why it was important for my research to see identity as a process that is continually reshaped at the crossing of past and present experiences. In this approach I am inspired by Hall's definition of identity as 'as a kind of unsettled space...between a number of intersecting discourses' (1991: 10). Giddens (1991) sees identity as a 'narrative of the self'. Fischer-Rosenthal (1995) emphasizes this narrative character by proposing to replace the word 'identity' with 'biography'. Following this approach to identity, and in order to get a clear idea of these past and present elements in a narrative form, collecting life stories turned out to be of great importance for the research.

In spite of the broad appropriation of the life story as a method, many scholars from women's studies believe that this research method is especially useful regarding marginalized groups that need more room in order to be able to express themselves. The possible danger of other methodologies is that the basic assumptions of the dominant groups, including the researchers, would not create enough space for those who are not used to be in the dominant position of power. In this line of argument this method is considered very suitable for women, because it allows them time and space to express their feelings in the form of a dialogue (Anderson and Jack 1991; Ardener 1975). During the interviewing process, a dialogical, interactive situation is created, including both the storyteller and the researcher. This situation makes the well-known hierarchical relationship that forms part of any interview less visible for both parties, sometimes even less present (Corradi 1991). In this sense, this rather more equal setting between the researcher and the storyteller helps the conversation to run more smoothly. This in turn could ensure that the dynamic of the conversation dominates the usual research setting, in which the researcher struggles to find answers to a list of questions, sometimes in a somewhat artificial way.

On top of that, this method gives room for reflection on past experiences. The research was about women with traumas from their past. They preferred to bury their past instead of being reminded of it. Therefore, the research concerned a very sensitive issue. Often, the memories were too painful to completely relive them. That is why there were many moments of silence, of pain, of crying, during the interviews: moments when feelings could not be translated into words. Silence or staring out of the window could then be the only ways to show the powerlessness or to describe past feelings. In this sense, I experienced as a researcher that the length of the interview and the fact that someone can actually take her time to be and remain silent, are very important factors to do justice to painful memories.

Ochberg (1994) goes further when he argues that life stories themselves can even create identities. Reading this sentence for the first time, I could not imagine how this could be done. However, at the end of my research I realized that the stories the women had told me and the articles I had written on the basis of their stories, had in fact changed our identities.

By telling their life story, some women were not only confronted with a past they would rather forget, but finally, they were offered an opportunity to give this past a place in the present. They also discovered that their experiences are shared by others. Their pain is a common pain, the pain of an entire generation. This did not take it away, but it did help the person who had experienced this pain to feel stronger by realizing that her story was a collective story. The stories of other women made my own past revive. I started having recurrent nightmares, because the past, despite my efforts to forget it, had come to life again. Yet, my confrontation with the past gave me the chance to build up a new relationship with the memories (Ghorashi 2005a).

### **The Present: Experience of the Netherlands**

The women I interviewed told me about their achievements as well as their disappointments in the new country. They have made great efforts in both the Netherlands and the US and have accomplished a lot within a short time. Still, the women in the Netherlands feel they are treated like 'the Other'. The experiences were diverse, yet the general pattern in the stories was that they were troubled by the negative images that existed in the Netherlands about 'the foreigners' in general and about Middle Eastern women in particular (Ghorashi 2005b). On the one hand, these women are expected to integrate; on the other, they are repeatedly reminded of the fact that they are foreigners and therefore not really welcome. The negative discourse about migrants and refugees only helps to intensify this personal feeling. The feeling that they cannot really belong contributes to the fact that they do not feel at home in the Netherlands.

### *The Process of Othering*

In order to understand this process of othering, I will explore the link between approaches toward migration and the feeling of otherness. In the Netherlands, migration is generally perceived as temporary rather than permanent. The discourse on migration in the Netherlands is dominated by the arrival of so-called 'guest workers' in the late 1950s. In the 1980s the Dutch government shifted its policy regarding guest workers when it realized that this 'temporary' migration had gained a more permanent character, so the status of this group changed to '(im)migrant' (Lutz 1997: 99). In spite of this legal shift, the general image of temporary migration related to these ex-'guest workers' did not change. In the 1980s, the arrival of refugees, the major new migrant groups in the Netherlands, reinforced the temporary image of migration. In guest worker migration it was the legal status that made the idea of return strongly present. For political exiles, it is the impact of political ideals related to the wish to return to the homeland that plays a considerable role. This is especially true during the first years of stay.

Despite differences in the motivations of both groups, return remains an essential part of both. This is not the case when migration is motivated by a choice to settle in a particular place. The key notion of return in guest workers or exile migration represents a strong bond with the past, giving both groups a distinctive temporary character.

The host country's expectations of migration as temporary can create mixed feelings toward the migrant when the process of migration changes to a more permanent one. The image of migration as a temporary state of being focuses on the past and not on the present, exerting an enormous effect on political refugees with the primary wish to return. The context of a temporary vision of migration keeps political refugees from facing the reality that return is not always possible, and that their political and emotional ties with the homeland may take on new forms. After refugees have lived for several years in a host country, their ties with the homeland can change, and their stay can take on a more permanent character. However, nostalgic feelings toward the homeland can and do emerge when the process of migration is considered temporary within the host society.

The perception of migration as a temporary phenomenon that stimulates us–them dichotomies, combined with a negative image of Middle Eastern migrants in general and women in particular (see Ghorashi 2003, 2005b), makes Iranian women strangers in Dutch society. Repetition of these processes of exclusion, either through media or in daily contacts, has a profound impact, deepening this sense of otherness among Iranian women. This process has also been reinforced by another factor: that Iranians in the Netherlands do not form a strong community, so the Iranian network cannot serve as an alternative social resource for these women (Ghorashi 2003).

Once Iranians become part of this process of othering, they contribute by seeing the Dutch as the others. They start to develop stereotypical ideas about the Dutch as being cold, distant, and stingy. They also start to see the Netherlands as an undesirable country. The space these women enjoyed in order to improve themselves becomes marginalized once they start to stress negative images such as bad weather or the coldness of the Dutch. The more Iranians experience being othered, the more this stereotyping of the Dutch increases. Thus, Iranians are not just passive participants in the process of othering in the Netherlands, but in some ways they are active contributors. This limits interactions between Iranians and Dutch people and deepens their sense of not belonging.

Consequently, these women start looking for a place where they do belong: Iran. This way, the feeling of being a stranger in the new country helps to form a selective reconstruction of the past to create an—imaginary—home. It is this 'Iran of their mind' that these women can and want to feel at home in. However, they recognize that this is not a realistic image because the Iran they once knew no longer exists. Besides, the Iran they want to have as a home is also the Iran they have become homeless in. The process of uprooting in the Netherlands therefore has two far-reaching implications

for their lives. On the one hand, the past remains omnipresent due to its constant reconstruction, leaving no room for the traumas to be released. On the other, their lives are made uncertain by a split situation: they do not feel at home in the country they live in and the country they would want to live in no longer exists. This segregated feeling causes uncertainties that influence their expectations of the future.

At first sight, Iranian women in the Netherlands are very successful. They have been able to build a new life. While telling their stories of the new country the women were very enthusiastic. They told me how they had mastered the language quickly and how they had completed their studies at a great pace. I started interviewing in the Netherlands and was amazed at how the women managed to combine getting to know a new country and studying in a foreign language with many other personal issues. Despite many problems, such as negative advice about their request for asylum, marital fights and divorces, or even good but still time-consuming things like giving birth or family visits from Iran, these women managed to complete their studies even quicker than their fellow Dutch students. The fact that they were super-active in daily life was one of the first things that struck me in their stories. At the time, I could only understand their life by using a metaphor: it seemed very similar to climbing a mountain.

Mountain climbing was an essential part of political preparation during the years of revolution in Iran. For that reason, many women pointed to this as an important factor that helped them shape their political identity in revolutionary Iran starting from the end of the 1970s. Mountain climbing formed one of the fixed rituals of being politically active. The leftist groups had a relatively heavy mountain walk scheduled for each weekend, with the purpose of training the activists both psychologically and physically. Usually the walk lasted for twelve hours, from six o'clock in the morning until six at night. Everyone had to carry a heavy rucksack throughout the walk, and no one was to complain about pain or thirst. Participants were only allowed to drink during the scheduled breaks. The activists had to restrain themselves, not complain about cold or heat but just plough through. It was essential for everyone to keep at the pace of the group and not walk too fast or too slow. The objective was to increase inner strength and respect collectivity at the same time. Once the summit had been reached, revolutionary songs were sung and practised, and after lunch it was time to go back. At the end of the walk, the day was evaluated. During this evaluation, people who had behaved too individually or weakly were attacked verbally. Most women told me that they used to be very afraid of these meetings. They feared criticism by the group, mainly because that would mean loss of face. The slogan of that time was self-constraint, both psychologically and physically. During the mountain walks this was translated into: just keep going and don't complain.

While analysing the stories of these women in the Netherlands I had the feeling that life for them was comparable to these mountain walks (see also Ghorashi 1997). They just had to keep going, they were not allowed to



complain but had to try and reach the top. Only, in life here the top was something different. It was a top that was constantly on the move, which is why they kept going without an end in sight. At first sight, it seemed as if this did not bother the women. When they told me about their life in the Netherlands, their stories were powerful and passionate. Thanks to the time I could spend speaking to them and the resulting length of the stories, I could discern two levels in the stories of these women. The first was the expressive level, where the women themselves talked about their experiences. Their passion and talkativeness about their life in the Netherlands could be compared to the way they spoke about their experiences in Iran prior to 1981, when there was still relative political freedom.

However, a second level could be distinguished within the stories, which I will call the latent level. At this level, words were not enough for the women to describe their experiences. Most of the interviews in the Netherlands were full of these moments of silence and insecurity. Actually, it was attention to this latent level within the stories that opened the door for me to take the analysis one step further, instead of merely being satisfied with the expressive side of the stories. During interviews, a researcher is mostly looking for what is being said, not for the things that remain concealed. Still, the room I had within the life stories method offered me the opportunity to also pay attention to silence.

### **What to do with Silence?**

During the interviews I asked questions about five periods in the lives of the women. I started with questions about their childhood and the relationship with their family. The next questions were about the time the women had become politicized. Subsequently, I asked about their experience with the revolution or ‘the spring of freedom’ when they had become fulltime political activists. In fourth place came the years of oppression or ‘the dark period’ when they were persecuted because of their political past and had to live in fear and uncertainty. Finally, I would ask them about living in exile.

The most striking pattern of difference within most stories from both countries was the difference between the stories about the ‘spring of freedom’ and ‘the dark period’. When speaking about the years of political freedom in Iran, the women’s stories were full of energy and passion. They told me what it meant to them to suddenly get the chance to enter the political arena.<sup>1</sup> Many called this the period of paradise. Finally, the streets of Iran had again become the stage for open political discussions. Books that had previously been forbidden appeared on the market. Revolutionary music could be heard everywhere. Universities became centres for political discussions and lectures by prominent politicians and theoreticians. In the stories, the memories of this time were narrated strongly and joyfully. The stories about ‘the dark period’ contrasted sharply with this. The women recalled the memories from

this period in quivering voices and with tears in their eyes. In some cases, especially when people had lost a beloved person during this period, they would start to cry or fall silent. I would stop the interview and sometimes cried along with them because I immediately had to think of the loved ones that I myself had lost. Moments of pain and insecurity prevailed in the stories about this period.

At first glance, the stories that the women told about their lives in the Netherlands were similar to the stories about the revolutionary period. The fact that they had been given a chance to make a new start in the Netherlands, coloured their stories with passion and energy. Yet, some elements of the years of suppression were present in what they told about their life in exile. Occasionally, silence would fall and suddenly I would see tears in their eyes. This happened in most of the interviews when I asked about their future. They could not answer me. Most women said that they did not think of the future and lived from day to day. One said that she preferred to die before she would get old, because she did not want to imagine what her life here would look like then. Although their success in life meant that they had some short-term future plans in mind, this did not mean that they were secure enough about their long-term future. Most of them would say to me: 'What is going to become of us here? We will never find our place here, but is there any place for us left in Iran?'

After these moments of silence the women started speaking again when I asked them where their home was. Some directly pointed at the fact that they were stuck between the Netherlands and Iran and did not know where the future would bring them. Iran is their home but they are also aware that there is no future for them in Iran. They are realistic enough to see that both Iran and they themselves have changed deeply throughout the exile years. They feel torn apart between here and there. Here they live but do not feel at home; there, where they hope to feel at home, there is no place for them anymore. This feeling of being torn apart combined with the fact that they do not feel at home here means that these women are not sure of their life. Their uncertain present gives them an unsure and unsafe feeling about their future as well. Most women's initial reaction to the question about their future was silence. They said nothing for a while; some started to cry. Only later in their story they started to relate their reaction to the future to their sense of 'uprooting'. One of the women expressed her view in the following way:

We [she and her partner] are always busy with plans for the future. I have many ideals, but they are changing all the time. I always want to go to Iran. I always wish to go back and live in Iran, but this is really a kind of dream, and I know it. [Why do you want to go back to Iran and live there?] I think that I belong there. Whatever I do, I remain a foreigner here. Maybe I thought five years ago like: 'Ah, I will remain a foreigner all my life here, they will never let us inside their circles'. But now I do not want to become Dutch. Do you understand me?

I am happy that I have become so conscious about myself. I realize now that I am a person who has travelled and migrated and has come here and stayed. But the main reason that I want to go to Iran is that I cannot forget about the past. Unfortunately, I cannot put it in a closet and lock it. When I smell a flower, then tears rush into my eyes. I remember the past, but a past that does not exist anymore. I see that there is no yard, no flowerpot, no space to live, but I want to be there. My existence relates to there.

Shaking or cold hands, tears and silence soon took the place of the moments full of passion when the women had been speaking about their achievements in the Netherlands. It was as if they had reached the top of the mountain, only to discover that the top did not mean anything. They have reached the top but there is no road to go further and no road back.

In retrospect, these moments of silence gave me the opportunity to discover a latent level within the stories. Despite their successes in the new country, these women turned out to be afraid and insecure on a deeper (in the sense of non-expressive) level. Listening to them talking about their activities I could not but conclude that they were happy. However, when asked about the future and where their home is, a different layer came to the fore; a deeply felt insecurity and awkwardness. These moments of silence could be compared to what happened when we talked about the oppression in Iran. They were scared and insecure then and had similar feelings now. But this time, the moments of silence were necessary to discover this similarity.

Nevertheless, there is a clear difference between the silence when I ask them about the future, and their silence when the story is about the dark period in Iran. While telling their stories about the dark period, the women kept talking and told me about all the things they had gone through. Silence only fell when they would get too emotional to talk or were not able to put that much misery into words. These moments of silence concerned the *indescribable*. They believed that there would be no words to describe what they went through in those years. When the subject of the interview was their life in the Netherlands, it was a silence of the *incomprehensible*. The women were rather surprised by this hidden level of emotion. With regard to this subject, silence did not fall because of the terrible stories that were being told. On the contrary; silence fell immediately after my question: What are your thoughts about the future? After talking vigorously about their achievements in the Netherlands, this question shocked them because they had no obvious answer ready. It silenced them in both senses of the word. A logical answer to this question could have been that they saw a positive future ahead of them because their life story in the Netherlands had hitherto been a success story. Unpredictably, this question about the future took the women by surprise, just as their reaction surprised me. First, there was a moment of silence and only minutes later, in some cases, an answer came that made a connection with being uprooted in the Netherlands. Thus, this outburst of emotions of insecurity seemed quite incomprehensible to them.

These moments of silence in the last part of the stories were essential to discover a deeper level in the stories about the Netherlands. With the word deeper I do not imply that this level represents the real truth; it is more a part of the identity that is not always clearly visible or expressible. The expressive level is as true as the latent level is. This is about different layers or sides of truth. There are moments in life when someone discovers an unknown or sometimes inaccessible side of him/herself. At the expressive level, when the women are telling their story, this deeper and inaccessible layer is not clearly visible. This is why methods like a survey or a structured interview do not reveal this less visible layer of the story. These methods mainly focus on what is said or written by the respondents. The life story as a method, on the other hand, offers space for the unsaid, the indescribable and the incomprehensible. The opportunity to have a lengthy conversation about life in chronological order creates a space in which moments of silence and the expression of emotions become visible.

By allowing the women in my research as well as myself the time to plunge into a life story, it became clear that most of the women who seemed to be very active and successful at first sight, were in fact very insecure and afraid on a deeper level. The moments of silence gave me the opportunity to put their stories into a wider context. Why were these women so afraid of the future? Some indicated this themselves: because they do not know where they will end up. It became clear that their insecurity is caused by a feeling of being uprooted in the Netherlands. However, there is more to it than just that. Their feelings of insecurity and uprooting in the Netherlands cause an old wound to bleed again. The fact that they feel uprooted in the Netherlands reminds them that they have become uprooted in their own country as well. This combination of uprooting, insecurity and fear resulting from the years of oppression in Iran intensifies their feelings of uprooting in the Netherlands. However, this deeper layer in their life stories only came to the surface when, as a result of the question about their future, they were suddenly forced to go from active storytelling into silence.

### **Experiences in the US**

In spite of their relatively similar narratives of the past, the positioning in the present countries was strikingly different between the Netherlands and the US. The women in Los Angeles have similarly contributed as active participants in their new society. The big difference is that in the US most of these women felt they belonged in their new country. They felt at home in Los Angeles and were not afraid of the future. 'If I have been able to gain so much within the ten years I am living here, then I will achieve even more in twenty years. Why should I be afraid of the future then?'

The Iranian community<sup>2</sup> in Los Angeles is in many ways a re-creation of the years before the revolution, an Iran outside Iran. For many Iranians who were brought up during the time of the Shah, 'Trangeles' feels more like

Iran than the Islamic Iran after the revolution. The whole setting of Iran outside of Iran, or 'Iranglees', can serve as a familiar environment, similar to the place where they grew up. This can stimulate their sense of belonging. Feeling at home has not merely to do with conscious choices that people make but also with surroundings where they could feel at ease: a known surrounding which is linked to the embodied past in the form of cultural/social habitus. The existence of the past in the present in Los Angeles has partly contributed to the fact that the Iranian women of this study see themselves as part of American society. Conflicting ideas about there and here combined with the emotional bond to Iran are also present for women living in California, but these double feelings do not keep them from feeling at home in LA. Iranian women in LA have access to two available social resources, American and Iranian. They interact within American society but their main contacts are with Iranians. In this sense they are not so much affected by the ways Americans treat them. Discrimination seems to be dealt with as minor and is not taken seriously. One of the women had a very interesting remark on this issue.

I have contacts with people who are anti-Iranian. [...] But I never felt that my progress has been blocked by those incidents. [Who are you in the eyes of Americans?] In the eyes of most of them I think I am a normal person, and also some would look at me and feel proud. They see me as someone who came from abroad and had the possibility to improve her position. I have also seen redneck people, but they are everywhere, also in Iran. When I lived in Texas, they left a letter behind my door; I do not know who did it, but it said something like, 'Go back home' which was very strange for me. [...] I think that the way we look at things influences the way we see reality. It is our description of reality that constructs reality. There can be racism, but we should think of dealing with a society that is different from ours. One way is closing the door on ourselves and the whole time interpreting the way others treat us because we are from a different background. The other way is to just go on and then maybe you do not feel the racist encounters toward you. I did not feel them because I have never looked at it in that way; I never thought that because I am a woman or a foreigner I am limited in doing things.

This woman's positive attitude is not only related to the existence of Iranian social resources in Los Angeles but has also partly to do with the discourses on migration in the United States.

By the end of twentieth century, the diversity among new migrants in the US contributed to a change in the historical approach to immigration that was based on the assimilation theory (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996: 17). Many new migrants entering the US had higher education and specialized skills and were prepared to claim a place higher up on the ladder of the host society rather than starting on the bottom rung. These new kinds of immigrants have challenged rather than adapted to their new society. Because of their high profile, they consider their migration a starting point

of communication and negotiation within the new society. For the most part, their compatible background enables them to start a new life within the host society with only minor adjustments required to language and diplomas received from their homeland. They do not see themselves as inferior; on the contrary, they see themselves as people who have a lot to offer and are not ready to disregard their backgrounds. The least effect of this new migration to the US has been that it has forced a more differentiated view on migration to the foreground, and has pushed the assimilation standpoint off to the side. It has also forced an image of difference within the US in which diverse migrant communities have been considered as part and parcel of American society.

The major contribution to this differentiated notion on immigration is the ways in which discourses on American national identity are constructed. These discourses are partially related to what Behdad calls 'an ambivalent concept of the nation-state' in which

[d]isplacement is the precondition for the formation of national consciousness in the United States. [...] In short, exile and displacement are not the opposite of nationalism, but the necessary prerequisite to imagining a national community in America (1997: 156 and 158).

Following Behdad's argument, the concepts of displacement and immigration are an essential part of national discourse in the US. Yet, the approach toward immigration is ambivalent. On the one hand, displacement is part of a national discourse, as America has often been called a dreamland for migrants, a place in which they are offered equal opportunities. On the other, a strong sense of protecting the national boundary against immigrants exists (van der Veer 1995: 2). Thus, it is not so much the immigration policies in the US that make America an 'immigrant country' but rather this ambivalent concept of national identity that creates space for difference as it allows those displaced and exiled to be part of 'imagining a national community in America'. In other words, the ambivalent notion of national discourse in the US has made it possible for the displaced to claim their part of the pie within the national discourse about Americanness.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, most of the stories of women living in Los Angeles show a different picture than the stories from the Netherlands. They feel at home in the new context, amongst others because they do not feel treated like 'the Other'. Several factors play a role here. In the first place these women have two available social circles: the American and the Iranian. There is a large Iranian community, organizing many collective social and cultural meetings. In the second place, thanks to the many Iranian activities that take place in LA, elements of the past are reproduced. The large number of Iranian activities can help to reduce nostalgic feelings about the past and to make people feel more at home in LA. Thirdly, a sense of 'belonging' is stimulated by the fact that California is a part of the US that is strongly

oriented towards migrants. Women are not addressed as being different because the majority of people in LA are different. Besides, since they feel at home in LA, the women are able to develop a positive image of the future. It is the combination of these factors next to others which have made California home to the women I interviewed. This sense of belonging in the US has recently been challenged by the new immigration laws against people from Middle East, yet the case remains that the sense of belonging in California has provided for a strong claim by migrants to their right to be American and to be recognized as such (Ghorashi 2004, 2007).

Sometimes, the stories of the women living in the US would also become emotional, especially when dealing with the period of oppression in Iran. Ironically, though, these women in Los Angeles were critical about the American society at the expressive level. They said that the US is a survival community where they have to work very hard to safeguard their future. However, they do feel at home in the US and even remarked that the US has a surplus value for them. This new country has offered them opportunities to develop themselves that they would not have had in Iran. At the same time they have the possibility to enjoy the Iranian culture that is abundantly present in the US. They have two sources to draw from in the US, an American source and an Iranian one. It is possible for them to have a place in both, and on the other hand, if one becomes too limiting, to distance themselves from it, because they have an alternative at their disposal. They did not have this opportunity in Iran, and therefore they mention the US as the country in which they feel at home. They call themselves Iranian-Americans. These women do not have a deep feeling of insecurity about their future; they are confident that now that they have achieved so much in the US in such a short time, they will achieve even more in the years to come. This feeling at home in the US makes it possible that the traces of insecurity and fear from the years of suppression in Iran could not be traced in their stories when they were talking about their life in the US.

## **Conclusion**

The use of life stories as a method was crucial for the research described here. Firstly because it helped to create enough space and time between the researcher and the women interviewed. Also the central position of storytelling in the research enabled the researcher to shift between two different positions as a researcher and as a person who shares the women's stories of the past and the present. In this sense room was created to go beyond the assumptions prior to the research and to incorporate the dynamic of the conversations into gaining new insights into the life experiences of the women involved, including the researcher. Above all, this method came to be even more compelling during the analysis of the interviews. In retrospect the existence of rather lengthy conversations, and of patience to allow silence or breaks during the interviews, seemed to have been quite worthwhile



in understanding the different layers involved in the stories told. Especially the sometimes lengthy moments of silence and other emotional incidents during the process of storytelling have helped me to conclude that feeling at home is essential for people to build a safe life and a secure future. Although the moments of silence were mainly present during the interviews in the Netherlands, comparing these life stories with the ones in the US gave me a broader context to situate these silences. This comparative context helped me to understand how the experience of the past is positioned in the present conditions and how the silence within the life stories became my gateway to observe this aspect of the positioned past. Thus it was the combination of the contextual comparison, and the patience required by the life stories method combined with other methods that enabled me to grasp the multiple layers of the stories presented by the women participating in my research. This was also the reason that I could look beyond the great successes of the women I interviewed, which dominated the expressive layer of the interviews. I realized that, important though the extent of integration and social participation in the new country may be, a relatively secure existence is only possible when people feel that they belong to their new environment and have the feeling that their contribution to society does in fact contribute to building a fairly safe future. This was not the case for the women living in the Netherlands, but it was the case for the women living in Los Angeles.

Having said that, I do not believe that the methodology I have chosen is the only best choice to do research on refugees or other groups, or that one should be part of the research group to be able to obtain in-depth data on the experiences of refugees. What I have tried to show is that within my research, with my special background and relation to this research, the method of life stories has proved to be rather indispensable; to open up new spaces, to be able to move within shifting boundaries, to create room for different layers of experience and to give voice to people whose voices are often taken for granted or (un)intentionally marginalized.

1. There were some differences in the way that the past was narrated. I have elaborated on these differences in an earlier work (Ghorashi 2003).
2. The term 'community' refers mainly to collective activities organized by Iranians in LA. I am aware that community, especially in case of ethnic minorities, is a contested concept. It leads to equation of community to culture through which culture becomes reified (Baumann 1996: 10). With this term I refer mainly to the existence of certain kind of networks and social and cultural activities that are in many ways constructed and imagined (Anderson 1983).
3. It is important to keep in mind that certain regional differences impact the way the differences are accepted. California is a part of the United States where the differences are most visible and where acceptance is much higher, as will be discussed later.



- ANDERSON, B. (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso.
- ANDERSON, K. and JACK, D. C. (1991) 'Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses', Berger Gluck, S. and Patai, D. (eds) *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. London, Routledge: 11–27.
- ARDENER, E. (1975) 'Belief and the Problem of Women', Ardener, S. (ed.) *Perceiving Women*. London, J.M. Dent: 1–19.
- BAUMANN, G. (1996) *Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-Ethnic London*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- BEHDAD, A. (1997) 'Nationalism and Immigration in the United States', *Diaspora* 6(2): 155–179.
- CORRADI, C. (1991) 'Text, Context and Individual Meaning: Rethinking Life Stories in a Hermeneutic Framework', *Discourse and Society* 2(1): 105–117.
- FISCHER-ROSENTHAL, W. (1995) 'The Problem with Identity: Biography as Solution to Some (Post) Modernist Dilemmas', *Comenius* 3: 250–266.
- GHORASHI, H. (1997) 'Shifting and Conflicting Identities: Iranian Women Political Activists in Exile', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 4(3): 283–303.
- GHORASHI, H. (1999) 'Verhalen als spiegels: Iraanse vrouwelijke balling onderzoekt lotgenoten', *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies* 2(1): 45–54.
- GHORASHI, H. (2003) *Ways to Survive, Battles to Win: Iranian Women Exiles in the Netherlands and the United States*, New York, Nova Science Publishers.
- GHORASHI, H. (2004) 'How Dual is Transnational Identity? A Debate on Duality of Transnational Immigrant Organizations', *Culture and Organization* 10(4): 329–340.
- GHORASHI, H. (2005a) 'When the Boundaries are Blurred: the Significance of Feminist Methods in Research', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 12(3): 363–375.
- GHORASHI, H. (2005b) 'Refugees: Agents of Change or Passive Victims: The Impact of Welfare States (the Case of the Netherlands) on Refugees', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 18(2): 182–198.
- GHORASHI, H. (2007) 'What has the Metaphor of "Bridging" to do with Hybridity? Discourses on Identity within Iranian-American Organizations', Sahoo, A. K. and Maharaj, B. (eds) *Sociology of Diaspora*, New Delhi, Rawat Publications: 542–557.
- GIDDENS, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
- HALL, S. (1991) 'Ethnicity: Identity and Difference', *Radical America* 23(4): 9–20.
- LUTZ, H. (1997) 'The Limits of European-ness: Immigrant Women in Fortress Europe', *Feminist Review* 57: 93–111.
- OCHBERG, R. L. (1994) 'Life Stories and Storied Lives', Lieblich, A. and Josselson, R. (eds) *Exploring Identity and Gender: The Narrative Study of Lives*, Thousand Oaks, Sage: 113–145.
- van der VEER, P. (1995) *Nation and Migration: The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- WALDINGER, R. and BOZORGMEHR, M. (eds) (1996) *Ethnic Los Angeles*, New York: Russel Sage Foundation.

*MS received March 2006; revised MS received December 2006*