

“Villains and princesses: gendered identities in press coverage of asylum in Scotland.”

Abstract

Taking a Foucauldian approach, this paper identifies press coverage of asylum as a site of struggle where competing discourses vie for dominance and a simplistic distinction between positive and negative portrayals is problematised.

Many articles lend themselves to a Proppian reading, with “heroic” indigenous people and “villainous” asylum seekers. Military discourses and animalistic metaphors further reinforce the negative masculinity of the villains. Newspapers that take a more empathetic or challenging stance reproduce these discourses to very different effect, using them to highlight and criticize situations in which asylum seekers are arguably treated like criminals and animals.

One interesting set of articles casts a woman as “indigenous hero”, thus arguably equating “heroic” elements of identity with femininity and “othering” the asylum seeking men yet further. Another set, about the threatened deportation of a family, focus on the young daughter’s recent role as a ‘gala princess’. Whilst superficially ‘positive’, this coverage is arguably disempowering in that it constructs the asylum seeker as a young, passive, stereotypically female character who “needs saving”.

The paper concludes that discursive and narrative analyses provide a multi-faceted view of the construction of asylum identities in the press, and that gender shows itself to be central to any such analysis.

Key words: identity, asylum, media.

1 Introduction

This paper developed out of media monitoring research carried out for Oxfam UK's Asylum Positive Images Programme. The paper considers the gendered nature of the identities constructed in press coverage of asylum in Scotland. The under-representation of women asylum seekers in press coverage of asylum has been documented previously, for example Article 19 (2003) and Oxfam (2006) both point out that when photographs of asylum seekers were used with articles (as opposed to, for example, the regular use of photographs of politicians with such articles) these tended to be of young asylum seeking men, thus reinforcing the stereotype of asylum seeker as 'angry young man' rather than engaging with asylum seekers' relationships within families and communities. My data show a similar pattern in terms of verbal content: of almost 300 articles, only a handful feature female asylum seekers as the main protagonist(s), and in all of these cases the asylum seekers are children or young people. Whilst the paper recognizes this numerical anomaly, however, it is qualitative rather than quantitative in its approach. Its main focus is on case studies, sets of articles that have been identified as having the construction of gendered identities as a major element. By revisiting the work of Propp (1968) and Greimas (1983) on narrative functions and binarily opposed narrative roles through a Foucauldian lens, the paper identifies press coverage of asylum as a site of struggle where competing discourses vie for dominance and a simplistic distinction between positive and negative portrayals is problematised. In particular, the paper observes the illuminating interplay between gender identity and asylum seeker / indigenous community identity at the level of both lexical choice and narrative function.

When attempting to identify competing discourses, it is useful to look for patterns in the language used to represent individuals and groups, for example lexical sets suggesting specific discourses. This paper will include such analysis, and will specifically illustrate the ways in which some discourses are recycled in ways that challenge their original, or traditional, use. In addition, however, the paper will examine patterns in the narrativisation of the articles. The paper argues that narrativisation of events, whilst an inevitable part of the construction of news, can also be viewed ideologically. Looking at narrativisation allows us to take a step further the pattern identification we begin at a lexical level. The ways in which different characters push the story forward, and the ways in which characters relate to other characters, are themselves value-laden. So, rather than just being able to view one individual or group as being relatively more positively or negatively portrayed than others, it allows us to see a dynamic relational aspect which adds another dimension to considerations of representation and, by extension, relative status in wider society.

2 Relation to other work.

On first reading through the three months' coverage of asylum covered in the Oxfam project, one of the key things I noticed was the strikingly traditional nature of many of the narratives in articles that have gendered identities as a major element and it occurred to me that it may be fruitful to examine the narratives in relation to some of the classic work of Propp and Greimas. Propp (1968), in a study of Russian folk tales, argued that

all of them could be reduced to the same structure. This structure he based on narrative functions rather than individual characters: what the characters achieved is seen to be what moves the story on¹. Greimas (1983) argued that Propp's long list of narrative functions could be further reduced to a small set of binary opposites: subject / object, sender / receiver and helper / opponent. It is still the case that it is not the individual characters that are important; rather it is the relationship within each set of binary opposites and how this is played out. In this paper, too, it is the relationships I am interested in teasing out: relationships between asylum seekers and indigenous people, between the general public and politicians, and between men and women, as well as the ways in which these various binary opposites (if indeed they are constructed as such) interact with each other. If these press narratives about asylum could be read as traditional stories of heroes battling villains to free or win the hand of princesses, then that may well suggest that the discourses around asylum available to Scottish society, or UK society more widely, or at least the discourses around asylum that members of these societies choose to draw upon, are themselves traditional. Although this is not a study of audiences and so can only surmise about the relationships between press coverage and relationships in wider society, it is possible that the narrative functions served by different groups and individuals in these stories, and the relationships between these, have much to tell us about underlying assumptions about the roles different groups and individuals have to play in society. Thus, analysis of newspaper data in this paper can be argued to highlight for us the state of the debate in the public domain over issues of asylum and the roles asylum seekers, the general public and politicians are assigned in that debate. It will in particular be interesting to observe to what extent my observation of the traditional nature of the narratives holds under further examination, as such traditional representations could be argued to stunt the development of complex, multi-dimensional relationships between members of the asylum and indigenous communities in Scottish and UK society. Reports on press coverage of asylum have all found that lack of contextualisation, lack of diversity of sources and use of stereotypical images contribute to a general lack of complexity in the reporting, although when we look at all reports together there would appear to have been some improvement over time. The observations made in this paper bring a new angle to this lack of contextualization.

The paper draws upon and complements well known work on lexical representation and narrative structure by such authors as Fowler, Fairclough, Van Dijk and Bell. Fowler (1991) illustrates well the fact that language cannot reflect events neutrally. He draws our attention to the implications of word choice for how a news actor is viewed, and the implications of transitivity for where responsibility is seen to lie. Who is doing what to whom, whether the process is active or passive, and indeed whether the event is even represented as a process (as opposed to, for example, a nominalization) all potentially change the ideological force of a sentence. These points are all relevant to this paper, but transitivity proves particularly interesting when looking at the functions that are attributed to male and female news actors.

Fairclough (1995) also points out that choices are made when writing news articles. One of the main choices he talks about is that between presence and absence, i.e. it may be the case that only certain (relevant) aspects of an event turn up in any one article that is

written about it. He goes further than this, however, to talk about ‘degrees of presence’. He says that different aspects are highlighted to a greater or lesser extent: they can be foregrounded, backgrounded or presupposed (i.e. not mentioned explicitly but implied by other information). Fairclough’s ‘degrees of presence’ are relevant to my work in the sense that what we are told – or not told – about a person, either in relation to the immediate events or their background more generally (for example the reasons why a person may have sought asylum in the UK) has implications for which positions they can be seen to inhabit or functions they can be seen to carry out.

Van Dijk (1998) brings in a relational aspect when he observes a common relational pattern in news discourse that he labels the ‘ideological square’. This consists of an ‘us’ group and a ‘them’ group. The ‘good’ acts of the ‘us’ group tend to be highlighted and their ‘bad’ acts mitigated, while the ‘good’ acts of the ‘them’ group are mitigated and their ‘bad’ acts highlighted. The suggestion I make in this paper, that it is useful to look at news narratives about asylum in relation to Proppian narrative functions, builds upon this idea of a relational ideological aspect to media representations by providing us with various positions for each actor to inhabit. It makes for a multi-dimensional view of ideological relationships, but various ‘us’ and ‘them’ oppositional groups are often visible.

Bell’s (1999) work on news story structure is illuminating as regards implications for readers’ understanding of cause and effect in the events that have been reported, and is further strengthened by its engagement with the practicalities of the day to day running of a newsroom, Bell himself having worked in the past as a journalist. He points out that news narratives, unlike most informal oral narratives, are not chronological, and therefore do not have the same time structure as the events they report upon. Neither do they simply work backwards, which would create another logical time structure, just one that works in the opposite direction to real time. Instead, news stories tend to begin with the most recent development, thereafter filling in previous events and background information as seems most relevant and in line with the newspaper’s news values. Bell argues that it is therefore possible for the order in which events have occurred, and by extension the cause and effect relationships between different events, to be ‘lost’. It is also important to remember in relation to this that readers often do not read entire news stories. They may instead read the headline and a few lines in order to get the ‘gist’ of a story, and then move on to another. So, how close to the beginning of a story a detail appears also has implications for how likely it is that readers will pick up on it.

In an attempt to make links between detailed linguistic analysis and wider social theory as other work has done with conversational discourse (see for example Fraser and Cameron 1989, Coates 1999) it is illuminating to view this press coverage in the light of what Foucault (1980) has said about power/knowledge and dominant and deviant positions. Foucault coined the term ‘power/knowledge’, suggesting that power and knowledge are so closely related that they can be included in the same concept. His point was twofold: firstly, the more (dominant) knowledge a person has, the more powerful they are likely to become; secondly, the more powerful someone is, the more likely it is that *their* knowledge will be viewed as valid. The knowledge of the power holders becomes dominant (Foucault terms it ‘dominant discourse’) and thus becomes taken for

granted and by extension gains the status of ‘truth’. Dominant discourses by definition create categories of ‘deviants’ who are seen as being in opposition to ‘the norm’. Foucault’s work is relevant to this paper because the press presents us with ‘knowledge’ on a daily basis and different publications could be seen to be vying for their knowledge to be accepted as truth or dominant discourse. What constitutes ‘truth’ in relation to asylum is a highly contested issue and the position of different papers on, for example, whether it is asylum seekers or those who develop the policies to ‘deal’ with them who should be considered ‘deviant’ varies greatly.

3 The data

3.1 Case Study 1: Unrest in Detention.

3.1.1 Introduction. In July 2004, a detainee at Harmondsworth detention centre outside London committed suicide, which provoked a disturbance among fellow detainees. A number of detainees were then transferred to Dungavel Removal Centre in South Lanarkshire, the only removal centre in Scotland, where a few days later another detainee killed himself. There were significant differences in the way different papers reported these events. To foreground the suicide in such a story would potentially position the asylum seekers as heroes, in the Proppian sense that they are protagonists whose ‘family member’ absents himself, thus leaving them bereft and wishing to embark on some kind of a ‘quest’ to right the wrong / fill the void. Most stories however backgrounded the suicide, thus decontextualising the disturbance and reinforcing the image of ‘asylum seeker as angry young man’. The backgrounding of the suicide and decontextualisation of the disturbance constructs the asylum seekers not as heroes or protagonists but as ‘villains’ who upset the equilibrium of the detention centre (hero) and by extension the state. Some papers go further by highlighting the role played by the police in bringing order to the disturbance. The police can be viewed as the ‘helper’ who assists the hero in defeating the villain.

Thus the portrayal of events ranges from a complex situation that raises many questions about asylum seekers’ mental health, the suitability of detention centres and indeed detention as a method, to asylum seekers as a threat to national security, to a situation of conflict between asylum seekers and police. These various portrayals, because of the narrative functions involved, can be read ideologically. Where the asylum seekers are heroes (protagonists), they are given the status of a central character, a person who can play a central role in society and have a complex identity. Where they are villains they are seen as a problem for the heroes which must be dealt with. Where the police are involved in the helper role there is ideological closure: the villain has been dealt with and any more complex issues have been closed down.

3.1.2 Contextualisation, decontextualisation and recontextualisation. The Glasgow Evening Times was the only paper in the sample to carry the story on Tuesday 20 July, which is surprising given the events occurred in South East England and the *Glasgow Evening Times* is a regional (tabloid) paper based in Glasgow and covering that city and the West of Scotland. The headline read ‘Riot after asylum seeker’s death’.

Significantly, this is the only headline that included any reference to the suicide itself and thus suggests from the outset a link between the death and the violence that followed. The Chief Inspector of Prisons, Anne Owers, is quoted as saying that Harmondsworth was ‘failing to provide a safe and stable environment’ and that ‘this was reflected in increasing levels of disorder, damage and escape attempts’. The implication is that these problems could have been to blame for the suicide. In this article, the asylum seekers are given the role of hero. Anne Owers’ quote points to ‘villainous’ issues that are causing potential harm to the asylum seekers. In narrative terms this leaves the situation open for ‘helpers’ to aid the situation of the asylum seekers and challenge the status quo.

The *Evening Times* continued the story on Wednesday 21 July, in its ‘Britain today’ section on page four, under the headline ‘16 in asylum riot quiz’. The lead sentence reads: ‘Sixteen men are today being quizzed by police about riots that rocked a refugee centre’. There are several points here that set the *Evening Times*’ approach apart from that of the other papers. Firstly, the situation is referred to as a ‘quiz’. This suggests there are unanswered questions about the events that took place and does not, as some of the other papers do, immediately suggest guilt (villainy) on the part of the asylum seekers. Secondly, the *Evening Times* is the only paper to call the asylum seekers ‘men’ — a simple label, perhaps, but one that allows for the fact that their identities are more complex than simply being ‘asylum seekers’, and that they may have shown an emotional, human reaction to the death of a fellow detainee. Arguably the asylum seekers are still in the role of protagonist here. Thirdly, the grammatical construction of the phrase ‘riots that rocked a refugee centre’ puts the noun ‘riot’ in the position of agent and avoids use of the verb ‘to riot’, which would portray the asylum seekers as more violent. This is interesting in narrative terms because it places an abstract entity (the ‘riot’) in the role of villain, thus not assigning direct blame and suggesting the situation is complex.

The Herald, a broadsheet paper with similar geographical reach to the *Evening Times* and produced by the same company carried the story on 21st July with the headline ‘Arrests after violence at detention centre’. In a similar way to the *Evening Times* coverage, there is use of nominalisation (‘arrests’) and an abstract noun (‘violence’) which avoids assigning blame for the disturbance to the asylum seekers. That said, although the story is contextualised with information about the death, this does not happen until later in the article. A sample sentence reads: ‘The tornado unit, a squad of prison officers with a *formidable reputation* for swiftly bringing control back into the hands of the authorities, was *deployed* early yesterday to *quell* the disorder which broke out within hours of *the death*’. The assignment of narrative roles is complex and ambiguous here. The narrative structure could be seen to construct the ‘tornado unit’ as helper, coming to the aid of the heroic state against the villainous asylum seekers. The tone of this sentence however, visible in the use of words such as ‘formidable reputation’, is critical of the ‘tornado unit’, so the roles are not clear cut. It is important to note the use of military discourses, visible in the use of the words ‘deployed’ and ‘quell’. Two things can be said about this. Firstly, regardless of where blame or responsibility are seen to lie, the asylum situation is portrayed as a battle. Secondly, this discourse is stereotypically masculine. Both of these points reinforce the ways in which asylum has traditionally been constructed.

The *Scottish Daily Express*, the Scottish edition of a UK wide paper that places itself in the middle ground between tabloid and broadsheet, which also put the number of arrests at sixteen, devoted the whole of its page three to the story on 21 July. The headline focuses on cost: ‘£500,000 cost of riot at the asylum “hotel”’. The *Express* also uses the word ‘riot’ and, for most of the article, deals with the violence itself rather than providing any context of what preceded or followed it. The fact that the word ‘hotel’ appears in quotation marks suggests that it is taken from a source and, indeed, one of the centre’s chaplains, Mr Kehra, is quoted as saying that the conditions at the centre are very favourable. The use of the word ‘hotel’ — which is arguably not immediately relevant to the story — implies that the detainees had no reason to riot as they were living in such (allegedly) good conditions. So the *Express* goes further than decontextualising the disturbance: it recontextualises it with material that reinforces their ‘villainous’ nature.

The pictures that accompany the article reinforce this. There are three pictures, one of two detainees who have been handcuffed, one of two policemen in riot gear and one of Mr Kehra. There would appear to be no photographic evidence of violence, but placing a picture of handcuffed detainees alongside one of police in riot gear suggests there has been violence, and including a picture of Mr Kehra further reinforces the idea that there was no reason for the violence. ‘A suspected suicide’ is mentioned in the caption that accompanies the photograph of the police, but is not mentioned in the article itself until the fourth paragraph.

Once again there is use of military metaphors which constructs the asylum situation as a battle and constructs the asylum seekers themselves as stereotypically masculine. The following sentence is an example of this: ‘Riot forces fought a 16-hour battle to quell an uprising by asylum seekers yesterday at the UK’s leading detention centre’. Indeed, the use of the word ‘uprising’ divides the battle situation yet further into binary opposites by suggesting the asylum seekers acted, and, perhaps more pertinently, *decided* to act, as a unit. Any contextualisation in the form of individual asylum seekers reacting to the death of a friend is disallowed, and this exclusion of emotion further reinforces stereotypical masculinity. The following sample sentence includes particularly interesting elements: ‘Rapid-response “Tornado unit” prison officers were called in to corner 80 rioting inmates ...’. The use of ‘inmates’ constructs the asylums seekers literally as villains, being as it is a word usually used for prisoners, and the use of the word ‘cornered’ dehumanises them as it usually used to refer to the hunting of animals.

The *Scottish Daily Mail*, also a Scottish edition of a UK based paper that occupies the middle ground between tabloid and broadsheet, ran the story on page nine, filling almost the whole of the page. The headline reads: ‘£5m asylum riot’ and the sub-head: ‘100s of detainees torch detention centre. Yardie ringleaders behind the violence. But will anyone ever face charges?’ No other newspaper mentions a connection with Yardie criminal gangs, so we would expect evidence for this claim to be given elsewhere in the article, though this is lacking. It seems odd to pose the question, ‘But will anyone ever face charges?’, given that most of the other papers point out in their headlines that arrests have been made. The *Mail*’s suggestion that charges are unlikely to be brought, despite the

arrests, is a tenuous one that is hard to justify in a headline position. It is also interesting in terms of narrative. The asylum seekers are once again constructed as villainous, arguably moreso than in any of the other articles. Furthermore, however, asking 'but will anyone ever face charges?' suggests that no-one is properly fulfilling the roles of hero and helper, and perhaps attempts to expose the government as an 'anti-hero'.

In common with all the other papers (except the *Evening Times*), there is no mention of a death or a suicide in the headline. Instead, the *Mail* focuses on the alleged cost of the 'riot'. It puts this at £5m, a significant inflation of the £500,000 claimed by the *Express*. Focusing on cost (and usually relating it to the burden on individual tax-payers) is a common theme in both the *Express* and the *Mail*. Arguably this trend goes further than portraying the asylum seekers as perpetrators of violence. It actually dehumanises them by backgrounding them in favour of costs, thus treating them as pawns in a political game. Linked to this dehumanisation is the fact that the asylum seekers are portrayed as a group of '100s' rather than individuals. This portrayal also reinforces the masculine nature of the representation as stereotypically large numbers of people in a group are male.

In a similar way to the *Scottish Daily Express*, the *Scottish Daily Mail* not only decontextualises the disturbance by not mentioning the death in the headline or early in the article, but the *Mail* goes further: it does not mention the death (as a fact) at all. Instead we read the following: 'They are said to have spread rumours that the 31-year-old found hanged in his room had been murdered and his death was linked to that of another man who died at another centre. As the stories circulated, violence erupted.' This recontextualisation suggests that the asylum seekers built the disturbance out of nothing.

3.1.3 Recycled discourses: evidence of a site of struggle?

The *Scottish Daily Mirror*, the Scottish edition of a UK wide tabloid newspaper, carried the story on Thursday 22nd July with the focus on the asylum seekers being moved from Harmondsworth to Dungavel. The headline reads: 'Riot then, let's be having you'. This is the first headline of those we have considered to view the police negatively. It is a pun on 'right then, let's be having you', a stereotypical phrase associated with 'London bobby on the beat' police officers arresting people. This phrase often turns up in jokes and comedy and thus could be seen to mock or downplay the importance of the police's role, which in turn suggests that the asylum seekers are less villainous than how they have been portrayed in other coverage.

The lead sentence reads: '200 asylum seekers are moved to Dungavel after detention centre battle'. Like the *Express*, the *Mirror* uses military language. However, the 'battle' is presented as an event rather than a process involving agents, so the asylum seekers are not blamed for the incident. The next sentence continues in this vein, including information about the situation in an adjective modifying the detention centre: 'coach-loads of asylum seekers from a *riot-hit* detention centre in England were secretly shipped to Dungavel yesterday'. The detention centre is then referred to as 'the controversial former jail', the inclusion of which creates an implication that there may be reasons for

the detainees to react against conditions. The next reference to the violence is ‘after *it was torched* in a violent disturbance’. This is a passive construction in which the detainees are still not seen as the perpetrators of the violence. The first time they are actively described in this way is in paragraph 4: ‘around 100 detainees *caused* £5million of damage at the centre *when a Ukrainian man was found hanged*’. It is notable that, at the point where the detainees are shown actively being violent, this is linked to the suicide, thus implying a cause for the violence.

The Herald carried a story about the further suicide at Dungavel on the bottom of page 1 and continuing on page 2. The headline reads: ‘Death inquiry to expose Dungavel.’ The use of ‘exposed’ implies that there are negative things about Dungavel that are not known to (and may even be being kept from) the public. An immediate link is made with events at Harmondsworth, from which the man who died was moved.

The article states that Home Secretary David Blunkett believes conditions in Dungavel to be satisfactory and says, ‘the announcement astonished Dungavel’s many critics, but they may not have to wait long to return fire.’ This sentence sets up an ‘us and them’ pattern that we have not seen in this sample before: critics as heroes versus the Home Office as villains. The Mail and the Express have placed taxpayers against the government, but this is very different in that it questions not what money should be spent on, but the very existence of a detention centre in the first place. These hero and villain roles are reinforced by the recycling of military discourses that are often used to construct a battle context between asylum seekers and the state.

The article in *The Scotsman*, a Scottish broadsheet read mainly in Edinburgh and the East of Scotland, on the same day is not as empathetic to asylum seekers as the Herald’s article, but it ends with a quote from Mark Brown, a representative of the Glasgow Campaign to Welcome Refugees, that similarly recycles military discourse in ways that realign the ‘sides’ of the battle. He says: “This suicide points to the moral bankruptcy of Blunkett’s deportations. He has blood on his hands, and he should resign”.

The Scottish Daily Mirror also carries the story on 26th July, discussing it in its editorial on page 6 and placing an article about it on the top half of page 12. The editorial headline reads: ‘Asylum shame’ and the lead sentence reads: ‘The death of an asylum seeker at Dungavel marks a new low in the history of this vile detention centre.’ That Dungavel is high on the Mirror’s news agenda is highlighted both by the fact that it is referred to simply as ‘Dungavel’ and by the words ‘*new low*’, suggesting that the paper has been marking the various milestones in its history. The paper states that prisoners should not be treated like cattle (suggesting that people in Dungavel *are* treated in this way). It goes on to say, in italicised type, ‘*it is even worse when we do this to people who have not committed any crimes at all*’. This is an interesting recycling of the discourses that cast asylum seekers as animals and criminals, for example the use by the *Express* of ‘cornered’ and ‘inmates’. The italic type sets this out as the main point of the article, suggesting (as personal experience of the paper would back up) that this is the *Mirror*’s main critique of Dungavel. It is interesting that the word ‘we’ is chosen in ‘we do this to people ...’: it sets up an ‘us and them’ pattern of indigenous people as villains versus

asylum seekers as heroes. The Mirror itself and presumably most of its readers are not people who are either involved in the detention process or advocate it, so this use of ‘we’ suggests that people should take responsibility even if they are not involved themselves, i.e. that they should campaign against Dungavel.

3.2 Case Study 2: Misheel – a visible female asylum seeker?

Female asylum seekers are very underrepresented in the sample I studied. In fact, out of a total of almost 300 articles, only two articles and some related letters feature a female asylum seeker as a main protagonist. She is 8 year old Misheel Narantsogt, whose family have lost their asylum appeal and are due to be sent back to Mongolia, from where Misheel’s father, Jugter, is a political refugee. In the meantime, they have been placed in Dungavel Detention Centre. It is striking to observe which roles Misheel inhabits and which functions she carries out, and to question why she is the only female asylum seeker to have any profile in three months’ press coverage of asylum.

The Evening Times runs the story with the headline ‘Gala girl ordered out of UK.’ The lead sentence reads ‘Gala princess Misheel Narantsogt has lost her battle to stay in Britain.’ There are two interesting things to say at the very outset of the article. Firstly, yet again we see the recycling of military discourse from an empathetic and arguably campaigning stance. Misheel is constructed as a ‘battler’, but a battler of a very different kind to that seen in articles about the Harmondsworth disturbance. Here Misheel is assigned the role of hero. Secondly and relatedly, there are seemingly contradictory discourses in play, with a tension between the active and arguably masculine role of battler and the passive, feminine role of ‘princess’. The syntactic constructions related to these roles fit the active / passive binary opposition too. Arguably the placement of an asylum seeker in the role of (potentially) active hero is undermined somewhat by the fact that she is a female child coverage of whom personalises the asylum issue and encourages an emotional reaction from readers. The following sample sentences from the article further illustrate the fairytale discourse: ‘Misheel touched the hearts of the nation ...’; ‘The girl had been due to take pride of place in the Mayor’s Parade in Liverpool as a princess’; ‘Her devastated mum, Shinee, was forced to tell Misheel she had been *locked up in a castle*.’

The Scottish Daily Mirror runs the story with the headline ‘Kicked Out. Heartless Home Office sends gala princess to danger zone.’ The lead sentence reads: ‘Home Office pen-pushers have given the order to send *pretty Dungavel princess* Misheel Narantsogt back to Mongolia.’ The article is wholly empathetic to the Narantsogt family’s situation, and the newspaper ran a campaign in support of the family in the recent past. Like the *Evening Times* coverage, however, the fairytale discourse constructing Misheel as a princess is dominant and no other contradictory discourses are present in the article. It is perhaps notable to point out that Misheel is given considerable voice in this article. There are several quotes from an interview with her. Examples are: ‘I’m so sad. I am leaving so many friends. I cannot believe this is happening again ... I was so happy at the pageant and the people here are so kind to me ... I really am afraid to be going home. If someone could try and help us I would be very grateful.’ Although she is given a

voice, her words place her in a passive position form which she is asking for help. This is hardly surprising given that Misheel is an eight year old girl, and the coverage undoubtedly provoked the emotional reaction in the readership that the paper was aiming for. It could be argued however that this campaigning article simultaneously disempowers asylum seekers. By personalising the coverage to Misheel the article depoliticises her father's position as a political refugee, and by focusing on a (female) asylum seeking child, the article arguably by extension positions asylum seekers in general as passive, powerless people who need saving.

3.3 Redoubling the binary opposition: WPC's claims about asylum seekers.

One set of articles that is very interesting as regards gender and narrative roles covers the claims of a Woman Police Constable in Medway, Southern England, that the council are underestimating the violence that is arising from asylum seekers being housed in the area. One might question why this story ever became 'news'; presumably if the events the WPC claims were newsworthy enough in themselves they would have made the news previously. As it is, the main focus of this story is the WPC's claims rather than actual events. It seems to me that the fact that the Police Constable is a woman is what has made this story newsworthy. If we consider the articles in terms of gender and narrative roles, they cast an indigenous woman as a traditionally masculine hero, and this has considerable implications for how the asylum seekers are constructed in relative terms.

The Scottish Daily Mail carried this story on Tuesday 20th July on page 8. The story takes up the top two thirds of the page. The headline reads: 'WPC who dared to tell truth on asylum seekers'. This headline frames as truth that which is in reality opinion. This WPC has made a claim that has been challenged by the council. However, the *Mail* does not source the council until the end of a relatively long article, until which time the suggestion introduced by the headline could potentially stand in readers' minds. The use of 'dared' suggests that speaking out on this issue has taken courage and that the opinion she is expressing is not dominant knowledge. Daring is a heroic and stereotypically masculine attribute. For the remainder of the article the WPC is an active subject.

The sub-headline reads 'Stabbings, robberies, hundreds of squatters and a no-go shopping centre. That's the reality, warns policewoman'. The word 'reality' further underlines that this is being framed as truth. Listing the alleged events and situations in this way gives weight to them: the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Furthermore, no quotation marks are used. If this were a direct quote, or parts of several direct quotes given by the WPC, we would expect quotation marks to be used. Their omission, therefore, suggests some editorialising on the part of the paper and further frames the WPC's opinion as fact. This constructs the WPC in an active, vocal, and therefore arguably powerful position, which is reinforced by the use of word 'warns'.

One sentence in the body of story says that she 'shocked councillors by telling them they were underestimating the impact of asylum seekers'. The use of 'telling' again suggests fact and therefore power (cf. Foucault's notion of power / knowledge). Words like 'claiming' or 'suggesting' could have been used instead. And 'shocking' seems rather

strong when we finally get to hear from one of the councillors at the end of the article. He is reported as saying that it is not always the asylum seeker who is the perpetrator of the crime and ‘this is in no way disproportionate to the crime levels in Medway’.

The Scottish Daily Express carried this story a day later, on Wednesday 21st July on page 2. The headline reads: ‘Praise for WPC who spoke out’. Again, this is a contentious issue and it is not the case that the WPC was praised by everyone who heard about her actions; the council have challenged her claims so the headline would not appear to be a fair representation of the story as a whole.

Similar themes to those in the *Mail* article arise in the lead sentence which reads: ‘A straight-talking policewoman was the toast of the town last night for daring to tell the truth on how asylum seekers were wrecking residents’ lives’. Again the WPC’s claims are framed as fact and the same difficulty in making them is suggested. Describing her as ‘the toast of the town’ when the issue is contentious is, again, problematic, as it suggests support for her was unanimous. It also carries echoes of fairytale narratives, such words being used when the (almost exclusively masculine) hero has completed his quest and defeated the villain(s). So once again we have asylum seekers being constructed as villains in the midst of a very traditional narrative. Indeed, the words ‘how asylum seekers were wrecking residents’ lives’ polarise ‘asylum seekers’ and ‘residents’. Moreover, the implication of this is that asylum seekers in the area are not to be considered ‘residents’, and thus are not seen as part of the community. There is no qualification in terms of numbers, the implication being that all asylum seekers are causing difficulties for all (other) residents. The quote from the councillor in the *Mail* article said that not all events were perpetrated by asylum seekers. Similarly in the *Express* article, the council source is placed at the end of the article. It reads as follows: ‘A council spokeswoman said: ‘The last thing we want to do is increase tension. We believe the facts and figures used by the WPC were anecdotal and are yet to be substantiated’.

It would seem to me that the use of such traditional discourses and narrative roles in these two stories, alongside an opposition of both nationality and gender serves to ‘other’ the asylum seeking men even further than they have been in the other examples in which they have been constructed as stereotypically masculine villains. Stereotypically heroic aspects are placed on a female rather than male character, thus equating femininity with heroism and masculinity with villainy and allowing each to redouble the other, which in turn redoubles the binary opposition between indigenous people and asylum seekers.

4 Conclusion.

As first impressions suggested, it has been illuminating to look at the interplay of gendered identities in press coverage of asylum in relation to Propp’s and Greimas’ work on narrative and Foucault’s social theory, the focus on gender and the focus on narrative both adding new dimensions to work in this field. To consider narrative and competing discourses takes us beyond simply judging a portrayal as positive or negative and allows for a more multi-faceted analysis. We have seen for example, in the Harmondsworth and

Dungavel case study, that the construction of a person as a hero or a villain has as much to do with structure as it does with word choice. That is, the extent to which an event is contextualised has implications for the roles individuals within the story are seen to play. Arguably the extent of the coverage of these disturbances itself reinforces the stereotypically masculine image of asylum seeker as angry young man. To decontextualise, or even recontextualise in the case of the *Mail*, these events, further heightens the stereotypical nature of the image by removing or recasting the reasons for the disturbances. Some papers do maintain some degree of contextualisation however, and the recycling of ways in animalistic and militaristic discourses in ways that challenge their original usage and recast hero and villain roles makes the picture slightly more complex. The overall picture is stereotypical but not unwaveringly so.

Given that so little of the coverage has female asylum seekers as main protagonists, it is also illuminating to consider the interplay of gender and asylum identities in those stories that do. It is perhaps coincidental given that we are dealing here with only three months' coverage, but the two minor case studies of Misheel and the WPC's comments show that engagement with gender that may initially seem to contrast starkly actually work in not dissimilar ways in their general portrayal of asylum seekers. The WPC case study can be seen to redouble the stereotypical angry young man image by setting it against an indigenous female who is cast as a stereotypical hero. Heroic qualities are mapped onto an indigenous female which serves to cast the male asylum seekers as all the more villainous.

The Misheel stories can be viewed positively in that they do depart from the stereotype of asylum seeker as angry young man by focusing for a change on a female asylum seeker. That said, although in one paper's coverage Misheel is portrayed as both a battler and a princess, the princess role more than wins out on column inches, and the other paper's coverage focuses wholly on the princess role. Misheel is given a voice, something that is rarely seen in press coverage of asylum and is to be welcomed. Furthermore, it would be simplistic to argue that running a human interest story that appeals to readers' emotions is a negative thing, as it undoubtedly causes engagement with the human experience side of asylum, something that is rarely touched upon. Voicing the asylum situation through an eight year old child, however, depoliticises it, and the fact that that eight year old child just happens to be female and a 'gala princess' arguably casts asylum seekers in general in the role of powerless people who need saving. It is challenging coverage in some senses, but perhaps not as challenging as it could potentially be.

The paper has shown the importance of going beyond categorisation of portrayals as either positive or negative and the fruitfulness of engaging with discursive and narrative analysis to create a more multi-faceted picture. It is also clear that gender plays a key role in constructions of both asylum seekers and indigenous people in press coverage of issues of asylum, and should be engaged with in studies of such coverage.

ⁱ Vladimir Propp analysed a whole series of Russian folk tales in the 1920s and decided that the same events kept being repeated in each of the stories. These, he reasoned, were narratemes, or **narrative functions**, necessary for the narrative to exist. Not all of these functions appear in every story, but they always appear in this order. These 31 functions are as follows:

1. A member of a family leaves home (the hero is introduced)
2. An interdiction is addressed to the hero
3. The interdiction is violated
4. The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance
5. The villain gains information about the victim
6. The villain attempts to deceive the victim to take possession of victim or victim's belongings
7. Victim taken in by deception, unwittingly helping the enemy
8. Villain causes harm/injury to family member
9. Misfortune or lack is made known, hero is dispatched
10. Seeker agrees to, or decides upon counter-action
11. Hero leaves home
12. Hero is tested, interrogated, attacked etc, preparing the way for his/her receiving magical agent or helper (donor)
13. Hero reacts to actions of future donor
14. Hero acquires use of a magical agent
15. Hero is transferred, delivered or led to whereabouts of an object of the search
16. Hero and villain join in direct combat
17. Hero is branded
18. Villain is defeated
19. Initial misfortune or lack is resolved
20. Hero returns
21. Hero is pursued

-
22. Hero is rescued from pursuit
 23. Hero unrecognised, arrives home or in another country
 24. False hero presents unfounded claims
 25. Difficult task proposed to the hero
 26. Task is resolved
 27. Hero is recognised
 28. False hero or villain is exposed
 29. Hero is given a new appearance
 30. Villain is punished
 31. Hero marries and ascends the throne

These narrative functions are spread between the main characters. Propp also decided that a narrative needed to have

- the **villain**, who struggles with the hero
- the **donor**, who prepares and/or provides hero with magical agent
- the **helper**, who assists, rescues, solves and/or transfigures the hero
- the **Princess**, a sought-for person (and/or her father), who exists as a goal and often recognizes and marries hero and/or punishes villain
- the **dispatcher**, who sends the hero off
- the **hero**, who departs on a search (seeker-hero), reacts to the donor and weds at end
- the **false hero** (or antihero or usurper), who claims to be the hero, often seeking and reacting like a real hero (i.e. by trying to marry the princess)

References

- Article 19 (2003) *What's the story?: results from research into media coverage of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK*.
- Bell, A. (1999). The Language of News Media. *Language in Society* 16.
- Coates, Jennifer (1999) 'Changing Femininities: the Talk of Teenage Girls' in Bucholtz, Mary, Liang, Anita C. and Sutton, Laurel A. (eds.) *Reinventing Identities: The Gendered Self in Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Greimas, A.-J. (1983). *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*. Trans. McDowell, D., Schleifer, R. and Velie, A. (University of Nebraska Press).
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Media Discourse*. (Edward Arnold).

Fraser, Elizabeth and Cameron, Deborah (1989) 'Knowing what to say: the construction of gender in linguistic practice' in Grillo, R. (ed.) *Social Anthropology and the Politics of Language*. London: Routledge.

Foucault, M. ((1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. (Pantheon Books).

Fowler, R. (1991). *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press*. (Routledge).

Oxfam (2006). *Asylum and the Media*.

Propp, V. (1968). *Morphology of the Folktale*. (University of Austin Texas).

Van Dijk, T.A. (1998). Opinions and Ideologies in the Press. In Bell, A. and Garrett, P. (eds.) *Approaches to Media Discourse*. (Blackwell).