

« For me it was a relief, because it's the first time I really talked about my experience from beginning to end »: Life stories of asylum seekers in Montreal

Caroline Lester, M.S.W. candidate, Université de Montréal

In December 2012, Canada's inland refugee determination system underwent a significant reform, including variable application norms and procedures according to claimants' origin or transit States, and a sixfold reduction in processing times. In the context of our master's thesis, we collected the life stories of twelve refugee claimants in Montreal to gain a better understanding of how this important structural change might affect their subjective experiences in seeking asylum. Whereas in public discourse, and even in research, asylum seekers are often presented either as potential threats or victims without agency (MacDowell, 2013), the life stories method aims to create a space where participants have the freedom to narrate their experiences in a manner meaningful to them, and to situate those experiences in their broader temporal and social contexts (Bertaux, 2013). Participant thoughts and perspectives regarding the research results were also sought during a second round of interviews, so as to integrate them in our final analysis. We will present our findings relating to participant's experiences; their views regarding the life stories method and the collaborative analysis process; as well as some implications our findings may have for social work research and practice with asylum seekers.