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Social and cultural anthropology
Standard level
Paper 1

Wednesday 6 November 2019 (afternoon)

1 hour 30 minutes

Instructions to candidates

- Do not open this examination paper until instructed to do so.
- Read the passage and answer questions 1 and 2. Choose either question 3 or 4. Answer question 5.
- The maximum mark for this examination paper is **[30 marks]**.

Read the passage.

Passage adapted from Griffiths, M. (2012) “‘Vile liars and truth distorters’: Truth, trust and the asylum system” in *Anthropology Today* Vol 28 No 5.

Asylum seekers and refused refugees are some of the most mistrusted persons in British society, and are commonly assumed to be manipulating the immigration system. Most of the 300 asylum seekers I spoke to had been accused by the UK Border Agency (UKBA) of providing at least some untrue information. Such accusations are crucial, because the notoriously difficult decisions about granting refugee status are often based on assessments of the applicant’s honesty.

[...] Deception, uncertainty and mistrust are as much characteristics of the asylum seekers’ perspective of the immigration system as the reverse. But whilst an asylum applicant’s inconsistency is routinely interpreted as evidence of lying, that of UKBA representatives is considered indicative of inconsequential errors or even new versions of the “truth”. [...]

I conducted qualitative fieldwork from 2008–2010 with migrants who had claimed refugee protection in the UK. Some were detainees at a detention centre. There are considerable methodological challenges in conducting fieldwork in closed institutions and with such vulnerable individuals. Unable to perform “normal” participant observation, I used approaches including working for a local politician and non-governmental organisations. [...]

Constructs of truth tellers and liars are subjective, relying on cultural assumptions and expectations about how people think, remember and behave. British decision makers tend to assume that truthful asylum seekers have a good recall of events and present their stories in a consistent and unhesitating manner. In contrast, narrative variations and anomalies are associated with lying. [...]

However, people I spoke to admitted that occasionally they *had* been deceptive, generally in order to work illegally or to better their immigration chances. In some situations, “lies” may even be a rational response. For example, the rigid questions in the immigration paperwork may discourage full truthfulness. The UKBA assumes that people know “basic” information such as one’s date of birth, inherit names in particular ways, and that spellings remain consistent despite translation from different languages. Consequently, people may guess or invent these details rather than admit not knowing them; they adapt their statements to fit the decision makers’ requirements. [...]

Not one of my informants trusted in the UKBA but rather gave comments such as: “I don’t have any faith in the establishment. They deceive me”, or “I don’t trust immigration. Immigration are stupid”. [...] People also spoke of the UKBA as unfair and confusing. One could suddenly be released from detention and then promptly redetained, as happened to Sebastian from Cameroon: “They detain you, then they release you, then they detain you again. It is a matter of luck”. Sebastian lost his asylum appeal but was *released* from detention instead of being deported.

[...] Sometimes informants thought the system was downright irrational. For example, Richard’s assertion that he was homosexual (the basis of his asylum claim) was refuted by the authorities. Yet he was refused legal aid because of the income of his *male* British partner. Another man was accused of running away although he was actually in prison. Chronic mistrust and uncertainty may be a technology of power; one that encourages people to be hopeless and helpless. [...]

The irony is that a system that demands consistency from asylum seekers is itself inconsistent. As such, asylum seekers are held to a higher standard of truth telling than those making decisions about their claims. [...] I would go further and suggest that the “truth value” of UKBA representatives is considered far greater than that of asylum seekers, allowing the former to insist on particular versions of the “truth”. This is not only discriminatory but potentially dangerous, as it might involve life or death decisions. [...]

I do not suggest that asylum seekers do not “lie”, merely that an examination of the context in which they are embedded may help explain their statements. Lying can be a rational response to negotiating a complex and inconsistent immigration system. In any case, the terms “truth” and “lies” are too simplistic. Sometimes people give incorrect information because they do not know the “truth”, or because it conveys information that is more “truthful” than the strict “truth”, or because they anticipate a bias of mistrust. This might not necessarily be the same as lying.

[Source: Griffiths, M. (2012) “ ‘Vile liars and truth distorters’: Truth, trust and the asylum system,” *Anthropology Today*, Vol 28 No 5, © John Wiley and Sons 2012]

Answer question 1 **and** question 2.

1. Define the term **status** and explain how you would apply this term in the context of the asylum seekers and refused refugees in the passage. [4]
2. Explain how the key concept **belief and knowledge** helps you understand the ethnographic data presented in the passage. [6]

Answer **either** question 3 **or** question 4.

3. Compare and contrast the way in which the key concept of **power** or **culture** is evident in this passage with how it is evident in **one** other ethnographic example you have studied.

OR

4. Compare and contrast the approaches to research adopted by the anthropologist in this passage to the approaches to research used by another anthropologist you have studied. Make reference to concepts and ethnographic material in your answer. [10]

Answer question 5.

5. Why does anthropology matter? Discuss with reference to **at least two** sources of ethnographic material and examples from the passage. [10]
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