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Reflections on Refugee Studies and the Study of Refugees: Implications for Policy Analysts

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Abstract

The United Nations (UN, 2010) reports that 25.2 million people, an overwhelming majority from the Global South, are displaced: 10.55 million refugees and 14.7 million internally displaced people (IDP). The phenomenon of Refugee Studies as a field of academic inquiry is a main focus of this paper. This paper makes a case for more critical analysis in – and of – refugee studies in order to better protect displaced people and to assist government in creating policies which respect the dignity of individuals. Based on a review of academic literature, first this paper discusses key concepts, labels, and theories in refugee studies. Second it traces the emergence of the field of refugee studies. Following it discusses the dilemma within the study of refugee policy research in regards to our ability to remain critical while maintaining a close relationship with government funding agencies. Finally, the conclusion makes a case for studying asylum seekers as a distinct phenomenological group. Implications for the management of refugee claims administration, researchers and policy analysts are brought forward while arguing that theoretically a separate space for asylum studies is required.

Keywords: Refugee Studies, Asylum, United Nations

Introduction

Today refugees are statistically an important issue. The United Nations (UN, 2010) reports that 25.2 million people, an overwhelming majority from the Global South, are displaced: 10.55 million refugees and 14.7 million internally displaced people (IDP). The academic study of this phenomenon known as ‘refugee studies’ can be conceptualized as a phenomenon in and of itself. Its scholastic history precedes recent refugee migration trends and dates back to the displacement of Europeans during the World Wars. As of 2014, refugee studies is an entrenched and professional academic field of scholarly enquiry in the social sciences.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the development of refugee studies. This paper makes a case for more critical analysis in – and of – refugee studies in order to better protect displaced

people and to assist government in creating policies which respect the dignity of individuals. Based on a review of academic literature, first this paper discusses key concepts, labels, and theories in refugee studies and in doing so makes the case that refugees and asylum seekers are qualitatively an important issue. Second it traces the emergence of the field of refugee studies. Following it discusses the dilemma within the study of refugee policy research in regards to our ability to remain critical while maintaining a close relationship with government funding agencies. And finally the conclusion makes a case for studying asylum seekers as a distinct phenomenological group. From a policy perspective this translates into Refugee Claims Adjudicators being more aware of the subjectivity of the refugee experience when assessing claims. Creating a separate space for asylum studies, with institutional support, thus has both positive academic and 'real-world' implications.

Concepts, Labels, and Theories

'Refugee'; 'expellees'; 'exile'; 'displaced person'; 'internally displaced person (IDP)'; 'economic refugees'; 'humanitarian refugee'; 'stateless person'; 'tsunami refugee'; 'development refugee'; 'environmental refugee'; 'government assisted refugee (GAR)' etc. are all terms or 'labels' which carry with them certain assumptions. They all reflect an attempt to capture and articulate a particular reality which is different from the other. This objectivity is useful for legal-institutional purposes and it is an inescapable part of public policy (Zetter 1991: 59), but such objective labeling also risks muting the 'object's' voice and not accurately reflecting the 'truth' of his or her reality. Zetter (2007:176) points out that many times these labels are inadequate in "interpreting the complex structural causes and consequences of flight." Said (2000: 174) aptly noted this point when he wrote in his compelling *Reflections on Exile*: "at most the literature about exile objectifies anguish and a predicament most people rarely experience first-hand..."

As Zetter (2007: 173) notes, epistemologically we "deploy images to describe the world" and also ontologically to "construct it in convenient images." Based on this ontological position, an interpretive epistemological perspective asserts that we can come close to getting at what is 'truth', but never entirely. And since reality is subjective and is created from social constructions, using an interpretive approach and being conscious of one's own position in the social world when interpreting texts is the most appropriate way to try and come close to getting at what is really real. In studies with forced migrants, a phenomenological methodology is often appropriate as it is through learning the lived experiences of individuals that one can come closest to understanding how they have constructed their reality.

Asylum seekers, those whom have not been granted the privileges associated with citizenship of a state yet are seeking these entitlements, are the most vulnerable population and require special attention. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR, 2011: 3) reports demonstrate that people seeking asylum are a serious policy issue – in 2010 North America received 78,700 asylum applications and European countries received 269,000. In 2008, Canada deported 12,000 foreigners, and 70 percent of them were failed asylum seekers (U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants 2009).

Both sociological (see for example Lee, 2009) and psychological (see for example Hernandez, 2009) theories of immigration offer insight into the assimilation; integration; acculturation; and well-being during the settlement process, but they do not offer much in regards to explaining macro-level phenomenon such as forced migration. Theoretical work in relation to refugees and forced migrations is burgeoning. Stein's (in Malkki, 1995: 508) 'refugee experience' concept which involves perception of threat; decision to flee; repatriation; settlement, and so forth is a useful analytical model but - because of the complexity of refugeeness- Bascom's point (1998) noted in Black (2001: 66) that "there is no 'theory of refugees'" suggests that such a rational, linear model does not accurately reflect the truth that refugeeness is a complex and rather nonrational phenomenon. Kunz (1981) typologies of the 'social relationship categories' conceptualizes three types of refugees. First, *majority-identified refugees*, those refugees whom believe that their compatriots share a similar opposition to the home country; second, *events-alienated refugees*, those whom are ambivalent in their attitude to their compatriots and their marginalization in the home country; and third, *self-alienated persons*, or "exiles" whom have no desire to identify with their home country (and have no compatriots). Kunz states these typologies are predictive and thus universal.

The complexity of refugees and *refugeeness* - which includes intersectional personal and group histories; different socio-economic statuses; and psychological, mental, and physical situations and aspirations -makes a grand or meta theory difficult if not impossible. A grand theory "... posits a single, essential, transhistorical refugee condition" (Malkki, 1995: 511). Such complexity thus calls for multidisciplinary. As such, multiple sociological and psychological theories and models are useful in better understanding particular truths within the forced migration phenomenon but are not as fruitful in explaining the phenomenon in its entirety. Historical and anthropological analysis helps place refugees and refugee studies in particular historical-social contexts and also helps us identify what micro and macro-level factors have shaped how academics study this phenomenon. However even in recognizing the complexity of the experience - although allowing us to better understand 'truth' - we also risk producing "simplistic framing of what is a complicated migratory process ..." (Lee and Brotman, 2011: 245) which could lead to what Lee and Brotman (2011) call an erasure and silencing of the existence of very real violent messages towards refugees.

History of Refugee Studies

The birth of refugee studies as a separate field of study has no definitive starting point and it can be said that its development has been piecemeal. Dirks (1977: 1) begins his seminal historical analysis of refugees in Canada by writing, "[r]efugees have been a recognizable feature of human society for as long as mankind has resided in organized groups." Said (2000:181) writes about how "exile" or 'becoming an outsider' is an age-old practice; throughout the 17th and 18th centuries British expellees found themselves living the harsh realities of a miserable life outside of their home state (Bleichmar, 1999). Malkki (1995) and Chimni (2009) discuss the emergence of the field and write that "[t]here is no 'proto-refugee' of which the modern refugee is a direct descendant..." Yet in regards to the professionalization of the study, scholars point to World War One as a key historical moment in its development. Chimni (2009: 14) notes that conceptually one can distinguish between a number of distinct

stages of development: 1914-1945, where the occupational abilities of refugees were studied; 1945-1982, where refugee camps, spatial concentration and organizational processes were of main concern to scholars (see also Malkki, 1995: 498); and third 1982-2000, where refugee studies as an academic field emerged.

In regards to scholarship, earlier works were based largely on documentation of empirical examples of the displacement of individuals (Black, 2001: 65). This empirical orientation largely took a foundationalist ontological approach to the study of refugees. Studies were centred around the assumption that reality was “fixed” and the reality for refugees was more or less the same – refugees were fleeing a state and in essence were solely a “military problem” needing to be managed (Malkki, 1995: 499). This ontological-epistemological orientation led to the term ‘refugee’ in not being contested. Chimni (2009: 16) writes that “[t]he legal positivist methodology with its focus on extant legal categories is thus deeply flawed.”

Yet a professional field in the modern sense came about with the institutionalization of the study in the 1980s. It is during this time period that the institutional infrastructure for the field materialized. In 1982 the Refugee Studies Programme at the University of Oxford was created. Later in 1988 the *Journal of Refugee Studies* and the Center for Refugees Studies at York University emerged as academic institutions centered around the study of refugees. Currently there are dozens of high caliber journals specific to refugee research and also thousands of other articles published in anthropological; historical; political; and health journals.

Refugee Studies and Policy

The uncritical nature of earlier pre-1990 literature largely oriented itself around the study of policy (Zetter, 1988: 3). This “clientelist relationship” with agencies often meant that “the controversies which independent critical research may raise are not welcomed” (Zetter, 1988: 3, 4). “This policy orientation stems in part from the subjects, whose experience of violent conflict, displacement and human rights violations inhibits researchers from treating simply as objects for research” (Jacobsen and Landau, 2003: 185). Undoubtedly then with the growth of journals and academic centres devoted to the study, scholarship has maintained close ties with government and policy makers. Black (2001:61) notes that “such policy-oriented research within University settings has implied a constant battle to maintain academic independence and intellectual rigor, while simultaneously producing research of relevance to policy concerns, which is capable of attracting funding from major government and private donors.”

Indeed the extent to which such research may be explicitly or implicitly supporting the hegemonic or power-monopolizing policies of developed powerful states requires critical reflection. In the case of Europe, an abundance of critical studies of refugee policy has made little impact on reducing European countries’ exclusionist and securitized approach to people seeking asylum (explicitly at least). Zetter’s (1991, 2007) work on labeling shows that policy discourse associated with refugees works towards shaping the identity of refugees to distinguish between ‘refugee’ and ‘non-refugee’. Studies of social construction in the policy process (Ingram et al., 2007) have also shown that policy-makers will often intentionally

construct “deviant” groups so as to create the need for a particular policy which maintains the status quo.

The emergence of a formal, institutionalized “refugee protection regime” post-World War Two was instrumental in the emergence of refugee studies (Malkki, 1995: 506). Yet this international global policy network with supporting administrative apparatuses also resulted in scholarship largely framing its studies in and around the regime. This has intensified refugee studies connection to policy makers. As Malkki (1995:506) notes, “[m]uch social scientific research – whether resulting in policy recommendations, development reports, or academic articles – has been conducted more or less formal connection with (and often funded by) these international organizations.” In the field of Policy Studies, critical studies are generally lacking. In the field of refugee policy studies there is thus an acute need to employ what French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls ‘radical doubt’. Radical doubting involves “radical questioning of . . . operations and of . . . instruments of thinking” (Bourdieu, 1992: 388 in Delanty and Strydom, 2010). In this sense, “the sociologist [or researcher] is thus saddled with the task of knowing an object – the social world – of which he [*sic*] is the product” (ibid). Thus, critically examining a priori concepts and placing them appropriately within a particular political-social-historical context while being reflexive of one’s own privileged position as researcher is important. Future refugee policy research ought then to have a clear critical and reflexive component. Yet, is it possible for refugee studies to be critical when it is largely funded by government and other organizations? This is a second question which ought to be addressed in future research.

Then there is the issue of the complex and nonlinear policy formation process. In the past, researchers tended to assume that immigration research would have a direct impact on policy (Blewden et al., 2010). Yet the development of policy is not simplistic. As Blewden et al. (2010, pp. 13 and 21) explain, policy formation draws on many forms of knowledge, influence, and other variables in the complex immigration policy environment. This complexity presents additional challenges for refugee researchers trying to positively impact refugee (and immigration) policy particularly in ensuring that the rights, dignity, and equality of individuals are protected over the interests of the State.

Critical Refugee Policy Studies

Recent literature has adopted a critical approach to both government policy as well as refugee studies. This signifies an important shift in the development of this academic field. For example, refugee studies and queer migration scholarship in places such as Canada have merged to “investigate the ways in which Canadian refugee policies, social institutions, and dominant discourses contribute to the sociopolitical construction of sexual minority refugees” (Lee and Brotman, 2011: 243). In discussing the move from Refugee Studies to the more general umbrella of Forced Migration Studies (FMS), Chimni (2009: 13) writes that “the move from Refugee Studies to Forced Migration Studies should in my view be explored against the backdrop of a western strategy to employ *political humanitarianism* to legitimize a new imperial world order.” Chimni (2009: 17) provides a definition of FMS:

“the themes addressed by Forced Migration Studies include the world of IDPs, the smuggling and trafficking of persons, armed humanitarian intervention, and the

construction of a post conflict state, revealing that the concept of forced migration has been reconfigured to *primarily* reflect the geopolitical and strategic concerns of western states; it has also undoubtedly had some humanitarian effects”

The themes explored under the FMS umbrella are thus broad and encompassing of a number of different phenomenon. FMS takes into account largely more macro-level phenomenon which has resulted in forcing the migration of people. Essentially FMS is not centred around the UN's definition of what constitutes a “legal” refugee. Yet this is not necessarily a benefit. Nadig (2003: 373) notes FMS has become too broad and not enough focus has been placed on specifically refugees. As a result, refugees' situations have been lowered in the international system and their unique predicament has not received enough attention in public and academic discourses.

Indeed, recent critical literature has been post-modern in that it questions the ability of scholars to get at what is ‘really real’ as well as taken on many of the assumptions associated with post-colonialism. Chimni (2009) sees the shift from British colonization having only been replaced by Western interests wishing to dominate over the South vis-à-vis exploitative capitalism and political humanitarianism which seeks to further maintain the status quo. Malkki (1995: 506-07) writes that “the discourse of development has colonized refugee issues” and successfully depoliticized refugee movements, making them an issue related to the Third World and development and ignoring larger social-political processes which forced their movement. Further, Zetter (1991: 41) notes that such a process has been intentional by policy-makers; it has socialized refugees in a certain manner in order to justify structural control and regulation through hegemonic policies.

Indeed, if scholarship on refugees is to orient itself around the assumption of the UN's 1951 legal definition that: a refugee is a person whom is “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it then the refugee's reality becomes quite narrow, objectified, and the complexity associated with their actual situation is hidden. Further, thousands of other individuals whom are ‘displaced’ or are seeking protection such as IDPs and failed asylum applicants are excluded. Unfortunately in many ways, for the purposes of international refugee law, an objective definition is inevitably needed in order to “process” a person's worthiness of protection from harm. However, if refugee studies as a field is to focus its attention around only the issues contained in the above definition then the ability for research to find ‘truth’ is limited.

This academic debate between objectivity and subjectivity has created a divide in the study of refugees. Those whom wish to see the complexity of the refugees' situation reflected in the field have pushed for the study of refugee studies to be included under the umbrella of Forced Migration Studies (FMS). Yet those whom believe that such a marriage would only stifle the

conceptual distinctiveness of refugees have encouraged keeping refugee studies as a separate field. This paper argues that the study of displaced people needs organization. Therefore, specific concepts and labels ought to be agreed upon, but nevertheless open to critical reflection and adjustment as larger socio-political forces change the landscape.

In this line of thinking, the study of asylum seekers or 'asylum studies' ought to be placed under the larger, general umbrella of FMS because of its recognition of broad socio-political phenomenon. Similarly, refugee studies with its rather narrow focus ought to also find its "home" underneath the FMS umbrella. FMS indeed creates the appropriate 'back drop' for the institutionalized study of refugees. Finally, this largely academic and scholarly debate illuminates what Jacobsen and Landau (2003) called the 'dual imperative' of refugee research. Indeed even the article written here could be brought into question as to how it is as equally protecting vulnerable populations as it is pushing the scholarly agenda forward.

Conclusion: Implications for Policy Analysts

As mentioned earlier in this paper, labels are needed for categorical and conceptual clarity. Therefore, this paper argues that labels ought to be attached to individuals and groups. However, when scholars are using labels they first ought to define exactly what group or individual they are referring to and second, be conscious that the individual or group they are studying is actually a part of a much larger socio-political phenomenon. It is important that immigration (and other) policy analysts, those people whom are providing intellectual support to managers for decision-making, possess a critical analysis of the field of refugee studies in order to provide sound research and advice.

More recently, some theoretical and philosophical discussions have emerged on 'asylum' and 'refuge'. Adelman (1988) examined the term 'asylum' and stated that earlier the term was primarily informed by the idea of 'temporary safety' and later - as repatriation due to the principle of *non-refoulement* became more entrenched in domestic laws - synonymous with permanent settlement. Nathwani (1992) writes about contradictory discourses in Europe where the institution of asylum (or ideas about states granting safety) are contradicting with policies to restrict unwanted immigration. He writes that "[a]sylum practice could be seen as a subsidiary system of human rights protection . . . The purpose of the institution of asylum is to serve as a backup system [when the Convention refugee determination system fails to protect]. Individuals whose human rights cannot be guaranteed in their country of origin are granted asylum; thus, their human rights are protected abroad by the institution of asylum" (Nathwani, 1992: 364).

As noted by Zetter (1991: 40) and others, "refugees conceive of their identity in very different terms from those bestowing the label." Asylum seekers thus have a phenomenological experience different from each other as individuals, but more radically different from other categories of forced migrants. This paper argues that an asylum seeker is someone whom is: seeking safety but has not yet received positive receipt of safety - usually in the form of official refugee status - in a safe state or place. Important in this definition are the terms 'safety' and 'safe'. Indeed, these terms are subjective and complex. They are open to interpretation yet

based on the phenomenological tradition, 'safety' refers to the way in which the individual defines safety. This idea is supported by Kunz, whom writing about 'exiles' stated, "[w]hether they can be considered refugees or voluntary migrants depends on how much their ideologies clashed with those of their home country" Often this may mean that their experience closely aligns with the UN's 1951 definition, yet, it also includes individuals such as those whom are 'economic refugees', or in other words persons whom – if stayed in their home country – would die or live precariously due to extreme underdevelopment. Zetter (2007: 177) aptly recognizes this point:

"Minority groups are persecuted through insidious forms of social, political and economic exclusion, often without explicit violence . . . These circumstances generate continuing numbers of people seeking refugee status because socio-economic inequalities grow . . ."

Yet, Zetter also notes that such a conceptualization of refugees – which is couched in a language of human rights – is a "far less powerful instrument with which marginalized people such as these may claim the refugee label" (2007: 178). Nathwani (1992: 354) notes that human rights theory is rather altruistic and utopian given that such a human-rights orientation towards refugee policy would realistically result "in the plea for asylum for all human rights victims conflicting with a restrictive immigration policy" (354). Yet its purpose here is not necessarily pragmatic. Rather, such a definition provides more opportunity to study forced migration in a way that accurately reflects the reality of those whom are being studied. It also challenges one to reexamine dominant discourses as they relate to forced migration and perceived 'truths' which have been articulated explicitly and implicitly by authors.

Zetter's (2007:176-77) discussion of Afghani and Iraqi displaced people aptly showed how the 1951 Convention's definition does not suit the situation of all refugees. He writes that in the examples of Afghanistan and Iraq, " . . . the case for humanitarian intervention to tackle extreme human rights abuse has been used to legitimize military intervention which serves wider political interests. Ironically, these interventions may precipitate even larger flows of refugees and IDPs. Unarguably we see that Western countries have not responded positively in receiving the hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers worldwide. The legal-rational definition which the North has adopted and institutionalized through its administrative apparatuses has allowed for millions of people to remain seeking asylum often which has in turn added to the social and economic stressors already facing the sending and host country. Asylum seekers have an experience which is phenomenologically and conceptually different from refugees and thus require special attention.

This exploratory article ends with the recommendation that refugee and forced migration scholars ought to consider looking more closely at the experiences of asylum seekers as a conceptually distinct group of individuals. Their phenomenological experience as well as legal-rational rights as recognized by the State are radically different than that of other groups of people. It is also through studying this group that we can learn more about the State and its core functions, and through this analysis in a critical discussion, learn more about macro-level social-political phenomenon as they affect migration and ultimately human civilization. This

paper has showed the complexity of *refugeeness*. Acknowledging this complexity and critically reflecting on our study of forced migrants allows for a more holistic and dignified study of individuals. Further, by communicating this knowledge to front-line workers within the refugee protection regime such as Adjudicators and lawyers, we can better protect individuals whom are seeking safety yet are outside of the legal protection of the 1951 Convention's definition.

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