
THE POLITICS OF REFUGEE
VOICES: REPRESENTATIONS,
NARRATIVES, AND MEMORIES

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INTRODUCTION

THIS chapter reflects on existing debates surrounding the politics of 'refugee voices' by examining the relationship between representations, narratives, and memories of refugees' experiences. Drawing on literature framed by post-structuralist and critical theories, the chapter problematizes assumptions regarding the existence of 'a refugee voice' on the one hand, and the extent to which academic and policy discourses often fail to listen to or to hear such voices on the other. It does so by identifying different configurations of the production and consumption of emic narratives of forced migration and displacement (that is, produced by forced migrants themselves), exploring the factors shaping these narratives and the embedded power relations that permeate them. In particular, the chapter explores the practices and spaces which refugees enact and embody to contest the processes which lead to the silencing and marginalization of their narratives and experiences. To do so, the chapter is divided in three main sections which in turn address different yet interlinked manifestations of the 'refugee voice'.

SITUATING NARRATIVES

A number of personal, domestic, and international factors contribute to shape both the production of such narratives and the ways they are received, interpreted, and acted upon. The 'refugee voice' is far from singular, as is the case of the plurality of 'refugee experiences' (Turton 2003). As Soguk argues (1999: 4):

There are a thousand multifarious refugee experiences and a thousand refugee figures whose meanings and identities are negotiated in the process of displacement in time and place.

Recounting these experiences is also not a straightforward process, since narratives 'are produced in relation to socially available and hegemonic discourses and practices' (Anthias 2002: 511), and also in relation to the immediate and broader contexts to which they are a dialectic response.

Indeed, storytelling is part of people's everyday life, a cultural and intersubjective experience to the core (Eastmond 2007) in which a person draws on the cultural repertoires at his/her disposal to make sense of, imagine, and negotiate with others the world around them; such an exercise, this chapter argues, is simultaneously individual and collective, positional and situated, rooted in the past as well as in the present and future. For Jackson (2002: 18), 'by constructing, relating and sharing stories, [forced migrants] contrive to restore viability to their relationship with others, redressing a bias towards autonomy when it has been lost, and affirming collective ideals in the face of disparate experiences'.

As the chapters in this part of the Handbook well document, gender and sexual orientation (Fiddian-Qasimiyeh, this volume), age (Hart, this volume; Bolzman, this volume), different abilities (Mirza, this volume), 'race', ethnicity, and social class all contribute to make refugees' experiences plural and diverse. However, this plurality does not necessarily translate into humanitarian, academic, and media discourses, as these tend to privilege a one-dimensional representation of the refugee which relies heavily on feminized and infantilized images of 'pure' victimhood and vulnerability (Malkki 1995; see also Wright, this volume). By abstracting displaced people's predicaments from specific political, historical, and cultural milieus, these representations ultimately lead to the silencing of refugees (Malkki 1997).

In line with the above, the chapter's first section focuses on the relationship between humanitarian actors' (etic) representations of refugees on the one hand, and forced migrants' claims for rights and political subjectivity on the other. A case-study of Sudanese refugees' three-month-long sit-in in front of the UNHCR headquarters in Cairo in 2005 offers the opportunity to explore the tension between dominant representations of the refugee as an agency-less object of humanitarian intervention, and refugees' quest for recognition as political subjects. It shows the disruptive potential of refugees appropriating the vocabulary of humanitarian organizations and directing their claims for rights towards them.

The second section examines places such as national asylum tribunals and immigration offices where the 'refugee voice', while heard, is also probed, scrutinized, and dissected. It briefly discusses issues of truth and credibility in the asylum process and brings to the forefront the impact which the culture of disbelief that pervades the asylum system in Western liberal democracies has on forced migrants and their voices.

Moving away from the workings of the international humanitarian regime and national asylum systems, the third section in turn addresses the politics of memory and

memorialization of experiences of mass persecution and displacement and the extent to which the refugee voice does or does not become part of diasporic identities and state-building projects in post-conflict settings, long after the events have taken place.

Finally, the chapter concludes by outlining some of the epistemological and methodological challenges for researchers engaging with the scholarly endeavour of 'prioritizing the views of the uprooted, the displaced and the dispossessed' (Chatty, this volume).

POLITICS OF COMPASSION AND REFUGEE'S AGENCY

Drawing on debates in social sciences on agency and subjectivation rooted in Foucauldian tradition, this section looks at the 'refugee voice' as a vehicle for expressing refugees' political subjectivity. It argues that to understand what it means to be political as a refugee (in a broader sense), entails engaging not only with the causes and consequences of forced displacement but also with discourses and practices of the 'humanitarian government' (Agier 2008) and the politics of compassion that underpins it (Fassin 2011).

In Foucault's work (1979) subjects are produced in and by power relations and they embody and experience the social relations of which they are products. The Foucauldian subject, Butler (1997: 94) argues, 'is never fully constituted in subjection. It is repeatedly constituted in subjection, and it is in the possibility of a repetition that repeats against its origin that subjection might be understood to draw its inadvertently enabling power'. Nonetheless, the performative effort of naming can only attempt to bring its addressee into being since the interpellated subject's recognition of the name is a necessary prerequisite for this to happen. In this regard, refugees' narratives of displacement and asylum are produced within a set of pre-given discourses and power relations, and yet by acting upon them and being political (Isin 2002), refugees can open up transformative opportunities and unsettle given truths on the colonial footings of the humanitarian regime and its moral order (see Spivak 1988).

Following a brief introduction on etic representations of forced displacement by agencies variously involved in supporting displaced people, both internationally and at the national level, this section explores more closely the tension between, on the one hand, dominant representations of the refugee as speechless and traumatized and, on the other, refugees' quest for political recognition.

Victimhood and Agency

While negative representations of refugees in media and political discourse tend to generate significant academic interest, much less critical attention has been devoted to date to investigate the ways in which pro-asylum organizations and advocates

represent forced migration and refugees, and to what effect (Rajaram 2002; Pupavac 2008; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014). Research shows how Western humanitarian organizations frequently resort to a vocabulary of trauma and vulnerability to describe the condition of refugees and others who have survived conflict and persecution. This discursive frame operates in conjunction with other forms of interventions within what Malkki terms 'the international order of things' to produce refugees as a universal and dehistoricized category of humanity (Malkki 1995). The depoliticization of refugees happens in two ways: at the micro-level, by neglecting and/or denying the importance of the political in their experience of exile (Essed, Frerks, and Schrijvers 2004); and at the macro-level, by concealing behind the discourse of the West's humanitarianism present and past involvement in producing the causes of conflict and forced migration.

The kind of sympathy mobilized by the trauma-centred discourse, Pupavac (2008: 280) points out, 'unlike political solidarity, is not based on a relationship between equals, but one of dependency, in which those with impaired capacity are released from normal responsibilities' and their capacity for self-determination and political subjectivity is called into question (cf. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014). They are consigned to a 'mute and faceless physical mass' (Rajaram 2002: 247) and denied the right to present narratives that may disturb the dominant *truth* on asylum.

The trauma discourse and the pathologization of refugees, while disabling for the objects of humanitarian intervention, makes Western 'experts' and support organizations the only trustworthy voice to speak for refugees and about the experience of forced displacement, turning refugee lives into 'a site where Western ways of knowing are reproduced'² (Rajaram 2002: 247). In the following section, a discussion of the 2005 sit-in of Sudanese refugees in front of the UNHCR office in Egypt will be used to explore some of the challenges that refugees' voices can pose to the humanitarian government and the international order of things.

Claiming Rights: The 2005 Sit-in of Sudanese Refugees in Cairo

In September 2005, dozens of Sudanese asylum seekers and refugees commenced a sit-in near the UNHCR headquarters in Cairo. 'Trapped in an untenable state—unwilling to repatriate, unable to integrate locally, and without the option of moving on' (Lewis 2011: 81), protesters complained for their living conditions in Egypt and the UNHCR's suspension of individual refugee status determination procedures following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Government of Sudan and the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement at the beginning of 2004 (Fiddian 2006). The sit-in was the result of long-standing grievances that Sudanese refugees had about the way the UNHCR office handled their cases: an 'opaque, defensive, all-powerful, and above all inaccessible' office to those it was meant to serve, in the words of an observer (Danielson 2008: 19).

Protesters set up a permanent camp at Mustafa Mahmoud Park, the area that served as screening grounds for nearby UNHCR, and their number rapidly grew to an average of 1,800 to 2,500 residents including single individuals and families, children and elders, and remained at those levels throughout the following three months. Meetings and negotiations among the sit-in leadership, UNHCR, and other parties failed to meet the demonstrators' requests. On 30 December 2005, Egyptian security forces violently removed the protesters; 28 were killed (Azzam 2006).

When the sit-in started, protesters delivered a 'list of requests' to UNHCR. They articulated their demands employing the vocabulary of the 'humanitarian government'—the requests directed to UNHCR abound in terms such as 'human rights', 'resettlement', 'protection', 'refugee'. However their very appropriation and use of these terms, as well as the institutional target of their grievances, broke the unwritten rules of the international (moral) order of things (to paraphrase Malkki), producing an 'interruption of the UNHCR's monopoly over the language of protection, care, and resettlement' (Moulin and Nyers 2007: 363, Danielson 2008). Inversely, UNHCR's initial refusal and successive denial of refugees' requests and, particularly, its attempt to undermine the protesters' legitimacy to make political claims to the Agency by refusing, at least initially, to call them 'refugees' and therefore not of their concern, demonstrates a sense of discomfort with a political initiative by a group of *self-proclaimed* refugees that challenges the UNHCR's position in the humanitarian government as the sole authority entitled to make *true* claims, in the Foucauldian sense, 'over the care of abject populations' (Moulin and Nyers 2007: 369).

The next section discusses issues of truth and credibility in refugee status determination processes and the culture of disbelief that pervades the asylum system in Western liberal democracies.

TRUTH AND CREDIBILITY

A growing body of literature has investigated the encounter between asylum claimants, mainly in Western liberal democracies, and the bureaucratic apparatus governing the refugee status determination (RSD). Such studies have explored, *inter alia*, the underpinning cultural beliefs that inform asylum case workers (Jubany 2011) and the ways that immigration judges, barristers, and community lawyers conduct the examination and cross-examination of a claimant's narrative (Coutin 2000; Good 2007; Morris 2010). Other academics have documented and assessed the structural factors shaping the assessment and judicial processes and how the legal truth is ascertained (Feldman 2011), and those that shape the claimant's narrative and that may lead in some circumstances and for some claimants to their voices being silenced (Berg and Millbank 2009; Chase 2010; Johnson 2011).

This section focuses on places such as asylum tribunals where refugees are expected to narrate their experience as part of the process of assessing the genuineness and

truthfulness of their asylum claims. In the first part, it discusses how the refugee voice is dismembered and reassembled as a legal narrative during the assessment process. In the second part, it argues that the emergence of some voices and the disappearance of others may have more to do with emerging global sensitivity to specific identities and issues than with an individual claimant and his/her story.

Refugee Truth and Refugee Status Determination

A widespread and pervasive culture of disbelief underpins the asylum process, with public attitudes to asylum seekers in many Western countries being overwhelmingly negative, tending to see 'them' as liars or 'bogus' claimants.

Decisions on asylum claims, in the paucity of objective evidential proof, rely heavily on the claimant's personal account and the way she or he recollects and pieces together the events that led to their forced departure. Such is the disbelief in asylum seekers that their voices, in order to be heard, increasingly need to be corroborated by more trustworthy voices such as those of country and medical experts; this has developed to such a degree that, according to Fassin and d'Halluin (2005: 606), the medical certificate (i.e. confirming torture or sexual violence) becomes 'the tenuous thread on which hangs the entire existence—both physical and political—of the asylum seeker'.

During the asylum assessment, the *subjective* voice of the claimant is dissected and scrutinized in search for *objective* legal truths. This is achieved primarily via a twofold assessment of the claimant's credibility and of the coherence and plausibility of their account vis-à-vis the general known facts (UNHCR 1992). Internal coherence and external consistency guide the decision-making process on the claimant's credibility and the genuineness of their claim to the point that credibility is often conflated with 'truth' (Sweeney 2009), and incongruences and inconsistencies in one aspect of an applicant's account, even if not directly pertinent to the case or of secondary importance, may exercise a significant weight on the decision of the claim for protection (Coffey 2003; Griffiths 2012).

Given the presumption that all asylum applicants are 'bogus' until proved otherwise that seems to inform government-led RSD in Western states (Sales 2002), it is unsurprising that developing a capacity to unearth incongruences is a central feature of the training of new recruits who, according to Jubany (2011), are socialized in their role not so much by being taught about refugees in terms of their rights and options, but through techniques to unmask lies and inconsistencies in asylum seekers' narratives.

Adopting internal coherence and external plausibility as the main criteria informing asylum decisions, however, can be problematic. Evidence in medical and anthropological research, for example, shows that torture victims may find it unbearably hard to tell their story of persecution in court as the physical pain of torture 'does not simply resist language but actively destroys it' (Scarry 1985: 4). It also demonstrates that there are multiple factors that may affect the capacity of victims of violence, rape, and traumatic events to recount their past experiences in court in a linear, accurate, consistent,

detail-rich, rule-oriented, and emotionally vibrant way, all features appreciated by adjudicators (Shuman and Bohmer 2004).

Whose Voice?

Despite the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees constructing the definition of the refugee in relation to an individualized well-founded fear of persecution, in RSD processes, the refugee often loses her or his individual identity. This is a by-product of the *formalism* and *formulism* of asylum courts. The former is used to denote the protocol that provides the script that actors must follow in the asylum court, and the latter the way in which, through the mediation of a claimant's legal representative,³ asylum narratives must be structured and verbalized in order to address the grounds of the Refugee Convention.

The way adjudicators make decisions vis-à-vis asylum cases also reflects and reproduces this process of standardization of the 'refugee experience', denying that an asylum applicant, of all people, is a 'candidate for the unusual' (Lord Justice Schiemann in *Adam v Secretary of State* [2002]). Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with immigration authorities in Spain and the UK, Jubany (2011) argues that immigration officers in deciding upon actual asylum cases refer to what they consider a 'normal case'. 'Officers categorize individuals into different types, according to certain "patterns", used as indicators to determine how deserving of asylum status applicants are' (Jubany 2011: 82).⁴

The key question is: what makes previously unheard narratives loud and visible in asylum courts? Especially given the strictly scripted set of rules, protocol, and discursive practice governing the working of asylum courts, the emergence of previously unheard voices is possible insofar as the 'normal' patterns mentioned earlier are redefined. This process of redefinition begins outside the court and informs the work of adjudicators as much as asylum advocates.⁵ However, it is never fully complete, as Morris's analysis of British case law on access to welfare for asylum seekers shows; rather, judgments become an argumentative terrain of negotiation and contestation where different ideas of rights, entitlements, and personhood are played out (2010).

The recent emergence of LGBTI narratives in the asylum process (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, this volume), for example, can be interpreted as the result of a societal transformation and a global movement which has also reached the asylum courts and plays into existing ideological divides. As such, although LGBTI narratives are not new in and of themselves, asylum applicants' voices are now heard by the actors inside the court, including adjudicators (Millbank 2002). Similarly, one can detect a growing attention to and audibility of the voices of disabled asylum claimants (Mirza, this volume).

Conversely, the accounts of persecution and forced displacement experienced by unaccompanied and separated children seeking asylum are less visible, as their stories are hidden and systematically denied by a protection regime that grants them protection as long and insofar as they are 'children', imposing a special type of 'pure humanity'

while deeming them unworthy of protection as individuals claimants as soon as they reach the adult age (Sigona and Hughes 2012; Schuster and Majidi 2013; Hart, this volume). Furthermore, information gathered while in care as deserving children is used to judge their credibility as adult claimants, reducing even further their chances for recognition of status (Crawley 2007).

SHARED MEMORIES AND CONTEMPORARY POLITICS OF BELONGING

Narratives of exile, violence, and persecution are produced and circulate in multiple public and private spheres, even long after the actual events had happened. After having briefly discussed the 'refugee voice' in relation to the international humanitarian regime and its discursive order, and to the ways nation states assess and decide upon asylum claims, this section turns to how refugees' narratives of persecution, violence, and exile play or not a role, first, in the creation and reproduction of diasporic identities across generations, and, secondly, as part of nation-building projects in post-conflict settings, as in the case of post-genocide Rwanda. Overall, it highlights the role that politics and practices of memorialization and commemoration play in enabling some refugee narratives and disabling others.

Refugee Narratives and Diasporic Identities

Remembering the traumatic events that led to displacement and loss of home and/or homeland is a central feature of diasporic communities (on diasporas and displacement, see Van Hear, this volume). Memories are socially constructed and culturally specific, always mediated 'but also censored, publicly and privately, officially and unofficially' (Chamberlain and Leydesdorff 2004: 229). The *yizker bikher*, or memorial books—a Jewish memorial tradition developed among diasporic communities—are exemplar of the agential and strategic nature of memory making and transmission to future generations. They were prepared in exile by survivors of the Nazi pogroms and contain historical accounts of community life before and after the destruction that annihilated their individual communities. For Hirsch (1996), these memorial books are 'acts of witness and sites of memory' around which diasporic Jewish communities construct a shared sense of belonging and where 'subsequent generations can find a lost origin, where they can learn about the time and place they will never see' (Hirsch 1996: 665). Memorial books and similar remembrance practices in which the individual voices and testimonies of refugees are collected to create a collective *memory of community* serve an important role in defining and reproducing the boundaries of the diasporic community as a living *community of memory* where new imaginings and politics of community can

be produced and 'critical alternatives (both traditional and emergent) can be expressed' (Clifford 1994: 315). These shared memories bridge the more private and intimate space of the family (Tschuggnall and Welzer 2002) with the wider imagined community (Anderson 1981) and provide the raw material on which new generations can construct their post-memory (Hirsch 1996) of exile and displacement as well as renegotiate and reinforce notions of who does and does not belong to a polity (Glynn and Kleist 2012; Lacroix and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013).

Official Memories and Dissonant Voices

Historical events are worth remembering only when the contemporary society is motivated to define them as such. (Schwartz, Zerubavel, and Barnett 1986: 149)

Commemorations, anniversaries, memorials, and other remembrance practices are often contentious affairs, as they constitute occasions when selective memories are produced, mobilized, and activated, and ideas of inclusion and exclusion can be created, reproduced, challenged, as well as thought anew. They become the arena where social actors compete to decide 'who has what rights to determine what should be remembered and how' (Jelin 1998: 24–5), inevitably producing politics of exclusion and spaces of 'non-existence' (Coutin 2003).⁶ This is particularly relevant in conflict and post-conflict settings, where alternative narratives of the recent and past events compete for dominance and where a large part of those who are or were affected by such events may no longer live as a result of the conflict.

In the 1990s, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission arguably provided one of the most ambitious attempts in recent history to bridge, on the one hand, the individual dimension—i.e. storytelling as therapeutic for the victim, based on an unproblematic link between 'voice' and 'dignity' and between 'voice' and 'being heard' (Ross 2003)—and, on the other hand, the collective dimension—i.e. a wider nation-building project in which individual memories of violence and suffering are placed at the centre of the imaginative work of forging a new public imaginary and sociality.⁷

Post-genocide Rwanda provides another example of a nation-building project basing its political capital and legitimacy, internally and internationally, on the remembrance of mass violence and persecution. However, in this case the voices of those affected by the genocide, including those forcibly displaced as a result of mass violence, are forced in various ways to conform with the government-led official narrative or to stay hidden. The Rwandan government's official version of history has been that the genocide of the Tutsi was motivated by racial hierarchies that were colonial in origin. In this context, Hintjens argues (2008: 32), 'progress and modernity, RPF style, seem to be about protecting Rwandans from themselves, since their attitudes are irrevocably tainted with colonialism and race ideologies'. In the process, the memory of genocide is also mobilized in everyday political interactions to police dissent—i.e. policing *through* the collective memory of genocide. Through the accusation of divisionism and harbouring a

'genocide mentality', the state exercises tight control over the public expression of political identities and produce a narrowing of the political space, generating uncertainty amongst civil society activists and political opposition 'as to what issues they can raise with the government and how critical they can be before incurring legal sanction or other form of intimidation' (Beswick 2010: 247), but also among *ordinary* Rwandans both in the country and to a lesser extent in the diaspora.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has identified and explored different contexts of production and reception of refugee narratives of exile, violence, and suffering to argue for a more critically engaged and theoretically informed understanding of the 'refugee voice' in refugee and forced migration studies that considers refugees' emic narratives as situated, positional, and relational. It locates refugee narratives within more powerful discursive fields such as those produced by the international humanitarian regime, national asylum courts, and diaspora and nation-building projects and examines the extent to which those narratives can be heard, and what strategies refugees have adopted to address the specific narrative and power configurations of these fields. Unsettling the 'voice' vs. 'silence' binary, this approach opens situated and contingent spaces for refugee agential intervention. It shows, for example, the extent to which claims for rights and recognition towards the UNHCR can disrupt (even if only temporarily) the totalizing narratives of humanitarianism; the power of silence as an expression of refugee agency in highly scripted asylum hearings and in the context of a widespread culture of disbelief towards asylum seekers; and the ways emic narratives of violence and suffering can be used to reproduce diasporic identities across generations.

Refugee voices have multiple footings that inescapably also permeate the encounter with the researcher that sets to collect and communicate (with) them. Interviews are 'saturated by images of the social dynamics of the interview itself, projections of the social context in which it takes place, the roles and power dynamics of interviewer and respondent, and their respective agendas, [. . . and by] the imagined texts that will be created through the use of interview data' (Briggs 2003: 246). This is particularly true for refugees who may have experienced mistrust and disbelief during the RSD process (Hynes 2003). It is crucial to bear in mind these elements in order to avoid what Bourdieu termed 'the biographical illusion' (Bourdieu 1994) and the risk of 'naturalising' interview data as a 'stable set of social facts that have an objective existence independent of the linguistic and contextual settings in which they are expressed' (Briggs 2003: 247). The interview (with the researcher as much as with the media—see Wright, this volume) is a situated and mediated (often via translators and interpreters) encounter and a performance in which the meanings of questions and responses are contextually grounded and jointly constructed.

However, there are also other power relations that shape the encounter between researched and researcher, namely that between the researcher and those who have the power to shape the agenda of refugee research and access to refugees (Harrell Bond and Voutira 2007; Eastmond 2007; Bakewell 2008; Marlowe 2010).

Reflecting on and incorporating the analysis of the 'refugee voice' within these multiple footings may also contribute to shedding light on what Bourdieu terms *doxa*, 'that which is taken for granted' (Bourdieu 1977: 165) and that which defines 'the space of the conceivable and utterable' (Hoffman 2011: 1) in refugee and forced migration scholarship.

NOTES

1. I wish to thank Nora Danielson, Alexandra Délano, and Jenny Allsopp for their bibliographic suggestions, and Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh for her thorough feedback on the draft.
2. For Rainbird (2012), such an exclusive position of expertise vis-à-vis asylum seekers' and refugees' predicaments enable organizations supporting asylum seekers and refugees to maintain a degree of influence in government policy, and to ensure a competitive edge in the privatized arena of service provision.
3. Research with legal advisory services for Salvadorian refugees in the USA shows that legal advisers select clients for legal support judging their likelihood of success on how much their story fits with the dominant narrative of deservingness (Coutin 2003).
4. However, scholars have also shown that asylum narratives with recurring storylines are approached with suspicion by immigration officers (Barsky 2000). Similarly Ticktin (2005) shows that French adjudicators feel compassion (and grant status) through notions of the applicants being 'exceptional'—and these assessments are intrinsically gendered in nature.
5. The extent to which religious persecution is prioritized by lawyers in order to fit into Orientalist and Islamophobic discourses, even if their clients do not identify with the terms and frames of the claim, is discussed in Akram (2000).
6. Embracing Butler's proposal (2010) to investigate the politics of recognition in remembrance practices and shed light on the conditions under which we mourn some lives while leave others unrecognized and silent, Délano and Nienass's work on the 9/11 memorial reveals the absence of Mexican undocumented migrants from the list of those 'deserving' remembrance and shows how the condition of 'non-existence' (Coutin 2003) in which undocumented migrant workers had been confined before the event projects long shadows also on their afterlife (Délano and Nienass 2012).
7. However, it also highlights the challenge for those who testified (Ross 2003: 325) of witnessing their testimonies developing a social 'life' outside their control.

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CHAPTER 30

CHILDREN AND FORCED MIGRATION

JASON HART

INTRODUCTION

SITTING in neat rows in makeshift classrooms under canvas, or waiting in line for food or medical treatment, children have dominated the imagery of humanitarian response to situations of forced migration. Popular imagination has been fired by photographs of the young having their basic needs met by relief agencies. In consequence such imagery has helped to mobilize financial and political support for interventions. Over many years, the common assumptions about children as the most vulnerable section of a displaced population whose experience is dominated by trauma and whose needs are self-evident discouraged serious enquiry from most parts of academia apart from psychology and social work. More recently, however, studies from a broader array of scholars have emerged, providing a more complex picture and challenging practitioners to consider their interventions afresh. In this chapter I seek to explore how the understanding of the situation of children in settings of forced migration is evolving as a result of research that brings a more socially engaged aspect to a field of study conventionally the provenance of researchers whose focus has been largely on the individual. Such enquiry will entail consideration of diverse ideas about the needs and competencies of the young and their interaction with the social environment.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) suggests that of the 33.9 million 'people of concern' to that organization around half are under 18 and thus