

BEYOND THE ROOT: UNDERSTANDING LIVES OF REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS IN ESTONIA

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ABSTRACT

Different groups of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrant's stories and sharing their memories play vital role not only to adapt in a new society but also to create new narratives. However, the elite political discourses and scholarly works often overlook this notion. The aim of this study was to explore stories and memories of different groups of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants in Estonia. Particular focus was on their shifting identities while practicing coping mechanism. Conceptual frame was driven from Giddens (1984) Agency and structure. Through interviews and observation, this study reveals that participants form heterogeneous presence, which is different that often portrayal of homogeneous group of people as "refugees" or "asylum seekers". Sense of individuality was profound among the participants. It is argued that immigrant's social gathering was more than collective or group solidarity, it facilitated individuals to get recognition through collective national identity building and group solidarity.

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1. Introduction

This study on the construction of the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers in Estonia has been motivated by the increasing concern and escalated tensions regarding refugee issues in Europe and global concern of the long-standing arguments on the political, social and economic aspects of refugees and asylum seekers. Besides all, it was the desire to explore a research paradigm which would be alternative than the existing monolithic approach, which has been so far focusing on the context of Russian speaking minorities in Estonia and Return migrants. One vital interest of this study was to explore a fresh direction on the refugees and asylum seekers who have the background from outside Europe and their experiences in Estonia.

Through the analysis on the told stories of the asylum seekers and refugees in Estonia, this research focused on the experiences and daily lives of this community. The emphasize of this study was to analyze the oral narratives, their life testimonies and the stories that they brought and carry while living in exile, their memories of past, present and their future journey in terms of aspiration, home and sense of belonging and identity. By studying the specific setting of studies on migration in Estonia, this study will enhance our understanding of

1. Refugees Everyday life experiences while in exile.
2. Refugees memories and told stories as part of coping mechanism and
3. Shifting identities while practicing coping mechanism.

Each of these parts have been operationalized into an array of more specific sub-questions depending on a specific point of interest.

Conceptual Framework

Agency and structure

Aspects of individual's free will, agency and structural constraints have been core issues in sociological theories in explaining immigrants and their life style. In regards to these two aspects, if we see Marx's notion of men make history, we can

figure, it's not that they do it of their own choice. To oversimplify or to ask a question whether a volunteristic theory of action is compatible with structural constraint? In the theory of Structure and Social Action (1937) Talcott Parsons addressed this issue which Sciulli (1986) in the recent time mentioned that voluntaristic action as used by Parsons has many different understanding. It can be the fact that a person's free will ability help to decide upon choices over constraints. It can also be an action without even recognizing the capacity. It may refer to one's autonomy as an unstable aspect in the social order, which in other case could involve normative practices.

Giddens (1984) somewhat addressed the same aspects in a different way when he tried to classify different types of constraint, which could be material and related to structure and it forms. There are some structural properties of which one can't change and could limit the range of options. Giddens came up with his concept Structuration altering or replacing social structure as static as external of an individual. He came up with the point that social structure can be created through the practice of one's freedom of action. This dissertation tried to explore this concept further with the refugees in Estonia and their everyday life and storytelling to develop a sociological understanding to address the behavior and experiences of refugees and migrants.

Adaptation, coping and resilience

In the field of refugee research, coping mechanism, resilience and their adaptation ability has been given emphasize and interest on these aspects are growing. How an individual try and manage against their psychological trauma that he or she faced are viewed as coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In spite of their previous experiences of stress situations and trauma, research findings indicate that refugees are free from debilitating their physiological pressure and illness (Fazel, et al., 2005). However, in a study of depression, Beiser (2014) came up with a finding which indicated that depression possibilities are approximately thirty percent among refugee population than general population. These experiences however do not necessarily lead violent character or any social maladjustment (Staub & Vollhard, 2008). Coping mechanism can be seen with people's surroundings, which can be enhanced through successive resettlement process. Therefore it is important to investigate refugee's

experiences in the host society and how they overcome their past traumatic experiences in their post migratory aspects.

Resilience is somewhat similar with the concept of coping and generally described as how an individual adapt from their past experiences which were stressful and traumatic (Luthar et al, 2000; Masten & Wright, 2009). From a personal attributes, theories of resilience moved forward into multidimensional aspects of skills and different characteristics, so to go beyond self-esteems and to blend the aspects of family support, social environmental aspects and networks of a community.

Adaptation refers to the patterns of changes of an individual or group of people get along in response to different environmental and situational demands. Adaptation which has actually produced different sort of theoretical perspectives. For instance Zubrycki, in Richmond (1988) identified six models of migration. Classical approach focused on assimilation and was functionalist in orientation. It contrasted with a Marxian, or conflict model which emphasized class difference between immigrants and indigenous populations. In the early time, the colonial situations produced the elite form of migration; on the other hand in the recent times it has been cross sectional in terms of professional status and diverse in the form of cultural aspect. Another approach focused on the phenomenon of stratification and segmentation of labor market (Richmond, 1988)

Berry (1997) refereed adaptation of which was termed acculturation and can happen both in long and short time. Changes in short term may have possible positive disruption in adaptation to a new societal and cultural context and could happen over long or extended period. In this dissertation the concept of adaptation, coping and resilience are viewed in effort to have an understanding of overcoming past traumas, managing stress situations and settling to the host society. Exploring how refugees use resources to cope and take strategies to adapt into a new societal and cultural context has been the objectives of my empirical studies. Therefore, having a firm base on previous literature on refugee resilience, adaptation and coping mechanism makes a backdrop of this empirical study.

Psychological well-being of refugees has been one of the aspects that is widely researched. Using ecological model, Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) differentiated aspects of societal, community, family and individual risks and the factors that can protect child refugees. An individual's immediate environment like community, family, individual aspects have been given emphasized in the ecological model as well as broader social perspectives in which immediate environments are attached. On a study of Sudanese refugees' psychological well-being, Tempany (2009) identified cultural and religious belief, which can be seen as social context are of important for coping and adapting into a new society. Fazel and his colleagues (2012) in their research on refugees' well-being stated that individual aspects such as free from any kind of obstruction of physical or psychological are good for refugees psychological health.

A research on 'Coping', Lazarus and Folkman (1984) differentiated Problem and emotion focused coping. When a refugee person solve a problem actively and manage any situation this way is referred problem focused coping, on the other hand where there are any negative emotions around and how it is managed is called emotion focused coping. Kramer and Bala (2004) in their research on refugee population in Netherlands identified four types of participants based on their coping style- Hibernators, Explorers, fighters and drifters. When they have less control on events that are external, they feel less power in managing those events and have the feeling of committing suicide is referred as Drifters. Hibernators are the ones that continue live in present situations and at the same time previous hardships are addressed by them. So they take the comfort by being nostalgic before their displacement and continue to live in the present situation. Fighters are referred as the ones who actively try to alter their situation and changing situation is what they look forward, when Explorers are also open to accept new aspects and opportunities. According to authors Fighters and Explorers had better psychological health and adaptation ability than other two categories.

Emotion focused coping mechanism can be viewed as beneficial dealing with previous difficult experiences and also to cope with present stress situation (Kramer & Bala, 2004). However a study of Afghan refugee women, Welsh and Brodsky (2010) pointed out that the combination of active and emotional coping mechanism was evident

when women took part of new roles in their family and take their decisions, which was different than their country of origin. During the course of their resettlement period women coped new situations and tried to combine their past and present experiences through their cultural and religious beliefs.

Memory and Narrative

Memory and narratives play important role to understand refugee families and how they build and construct their memories of the self and their families play vital role in adapting a new society.

Participants memory is significant to construct their narratives (Halbwachs, 1980) however one might consider memories as individual or personal aspect, however it can be viewed as social as well (Teski & Climo, 1995). Refugees are expected to cope with their host societies, hence it is assumed that they need to forget their past, so that memories of the past somewhat relegate and memories of now turns more dominant (Bneezer, 2002). Therefore Sociologists should pay attention to those stories, culture and memories that have not been heard or listened or are silence in the society to come up with new ideas and told memories need to be addressed and acknowledged (Feuchtwang 2003) and to do so families are the ones that keep the past memories alive and gives values in it.

Language is an important aspect while sharing memories, where the images of past, their nightmares, and their remembrance all comes into a social form (Alexander, 1995). The connection between memories and languages has long been addressed and recognized by the ethnographers and sociologists (Leydesdorff, 2000). Symbol of culture can be reflected by the languages that are used from told memories. Metaphores that are used in language, rhetoric and story narratives add importance and values (Linde, 1987).

Sense of self and identity can be addressed through the language and the shared thoughts and memories (Cavarero, 2000). What we connect or relate in the framework to recall by the narratives that a nation could express its stories. Cultural symbols are important to express and they can be found from narratives and language (Bruner,

1987). A personal aspect can sound as an individual narratives but the root and path it follows, the vibration that it makes, the languages that it uses reflects the cultural narratives of which any person or individual belongs or exposed.

Social class for instance can also be interpreted and evaluated through told narratives (George Steinmetz, 1992) and it depends on how we select on the plots and themes and the way we chose to recall of way of living. In many instances themes are a reflections of gender or race and popular culture (Dawson, 1994). Told narratives are a mechanism of which sense of identity can be acknowledged and narratives are also important to understand the world or society where we inhabit (Andrews, 2004). It does not mean that all told stories can be a part of it to understand the culture and as predominant narratives but the sequential course of life can be the plot to understand it. On a study on Jlaos of Liberia, Tonkin (1992) stated that it is also important to focus of genre which is being said into account. The same story can be spoken and can have different meanings depending on chosen genre.

Deriving from Freudian concept of id-ego and superego, Gleason (1983) pointed out that self-hood is driven from the participation of the society, its norms, culture being internalized and how they are being played in different roles. Memory this way turns to the core of our identity but the shifts that we make are from the narratives from within a story being said.

Aspects of Community and Family

Children with their parents and other family members have sound mental health than those who arrived alone, stated by Fazel and his colleagues (2012), this study also stated that in the family environment those who discussed about the conflict and war situations on their home countries have the chances to have children with mental issues than those who avoided to discuss these previous incidences.

Support from social services, a family with extended members and community can function as to perform better and to resettle refugees into a new country context (Lim, 2009; East et.al., 2010). Family reunion can be a matter of coping strategies and they give the support both in mental and materiel context. In a study of refugees in

Australia, Wilmsen (2013) presented many aspects that are negatively correlated while a refugee or a group of refugees are separated from their family members.

Family ties are also important as many studies also highlighted its importance. Inter-generational ties for instance has been described by Lewis (2010) in his study on Cambodian refugees to focus on how they became resilient to getting over societal and cultural gaps between the society that they are currently based in and their home country context.

Sharing experiences, emotion among the family members have been highlighted by a study on refugees in Canada (Simich et al 2014). Tamil refugees for instance in Norway were proactive in reducing future stress and to manage any strange situations by taking collective action (Guribye et. al., 2011) Research on how refugees face their traumatic situation also highlighted on family ties and collective action. For instance, a study on Tamil refugees in Norway, Guribye et.al (2011) also described that refugees tried to absorb and heal any news in relation to deteriorating situation and more conflict in their country of origin. In a study of refugee women in Sweden, Boerema and her colleagues (2010) stated that weeding participation, wearing traditional dresses and enjoying parties in traditional ways and musics also helps in settling a new society.

Coping mechanisms by a specific group of refugees have also been explored by researchers. Tankink and Richters (2007) for instance conducted study on Sudanese refugee women who had different experiences on sexual abuse tried to hide their traumatic experiences as in their cultural environment keeping it silent might heal the process to cope, the reason is, telling about any kind of sexual abuse is not acceptable in the Sudanese community for the women. Whereas double standered was found among gay refugees of a study carried by Boulden (2009), where participant experienced stigmatization and isolation from the sexual orientation.

Aspects Religion and Spiritual adaptation

Religion is quite close to cultural aspect, thus create a guide of feelings, thoughts and somewhat associated with identity. It might sound as an individual coping strategy when it comes to religious beliefs but can be associated with societal and

cultural aspects (Park & Aii, 2006). Participating religious activities can be associated with good mental health but on the other hand those faced persecution based on religion, in many instance it is not as good as for other groups. Sudanese refugees in Germany for instance prayed intensively for their country's situations to improve (Schweitzer et. al., 2007). Khawaja and his colleagues did research on South Asian refugees in Australia and he figured that during the transit, refugees always pray to get things better and to have changed their current situation and this way they found moments of peace.

Many studies focused on refugees' life and their experience through religion and beliefs. Tibetan refugees in India make their presence by focusing both past and present life through religious practice and beliefs through Dalai Lama and Buddhism (Hussain & Bhusan, 2013). Some Sudanese refugees for instance in Norway took their extreme traumatic situation as God's will made them to heal that in future things will get better (Goodman, 2004). Through individual and collective coping strategies refugees having traumatic experiences enabled them to live stable or adequately in a new society.

Narratives of Migrants, space, time and Identity

Global migration has always been an attraction for the scholars to investigate and quite often it is viewed as postmodern phenomenon by the researchers, despite of the fact that human being always moved from one place to another for their desire or by force (Mallki, 1992). Different surveys on the movement of human shows that migration has been on the increase side steadily since eighties (Castles, 2000). This rapid growth can be triggered by the labor dependency from the western developed countries, rising of global capital, conflicts and political unrest situations in the sending countries (Spencer & Rudiger, 2003; Castles 2000). Therefore displacement and exiles have been given emphasize by many scholars (Mallki, 1992). Some researchers addressed narratives of the migrants. These narratives provides us insights of migrant people and their thinking process while being exile and their identity practice.

Clifford in the year 1994 in his study on diaspora asked very basic question which fits into current context and this study was on how diaspora people represent their

experiences while in different country context and construct their identities? Clifford (1994) in this study focused on constructing new home abroad while exile, while theorizing space through displacement and this space came into perspective while making new home away from home (Braziel and Mannur, 2003). This aspect is noticeably important of this study as it addressed on the way refugees experience and spend their time while in exile and their narratives of belonging.

Migrant narratives in a different context have been addressed by researchers. Welsh (1978) for instance did a study on Asian migrants in England and came up with a view that Asian women face racial issues in Britain. This study was about how Asian women try to assimilate into the host society, when at the same time practice their own culture. In doing that, these women often face isolation and feel loneliness. Wilson addressed the narratives of their displacement can be viewed as merging of territory, identity and their culture' (Olwing & Hastrup, 1994, p.143) . Mallkki (1992) addressed Burundian refugees in exploring the narratives from two different dimension where special context came into please where the refugees were categorized Town and Camp refugees. Town refugees are the ones who could live freely in the town whereas other groups living in the camps can't. According to Mallkki (1992) camp refugees show strong ties with the home culture, on the other hand town refugees are open to explore new experiences and to assimilate to other cultures. Thus, how place and the body narratives shows different dimensions of displacement and how place can construct identity and the practice of belonging can be addressed (Ward, 2008). Hence narratives of migrants display how refugees recall a place and their homeland and construct their identity.

In the year 2000 Anne Marie came up with with an article on Memory, Identity and Space where she tried to address the discourse between Identity and Memory and Space. She did her study on Italian migrants in the UK and from a macro perspective of territorial context 'home', 'host', 'origin' and their belonging to construct their identity in the context of their memories. This study illuminates the connection of the notions of memories, their special displacement and formation of identity and provides a theoretical base to analyze the context. Sense of belonging can shift as time goes by and and change of space (Westwood & Phizacklea, 2000). To be able to understand refugees

and their experiences in different countries and society while in exile, the attempt of connection between present and past memories and space and time can be a basis to analyze their settlement aspects and their belonging

Methodology

Relevant methodological paradigm is a concern while selecting the approach. As this study is primarily concerned about the refugees experiences, daily life and memories, so this research had to depend on existing literature on oral narratives or life stories for relevant research methods. Hence research studies of Bertaux (1991), Yow (1994) and Tonkin (1992) turned as important sources of inspiration as these studies reflects the significance of told stories as a framework to explore experiences of daily life. Through these researches it can also be found that they argued in dealing with people who are in traumatic situation and their previous histories, life testimonies gave a platform through which one can understand their displacement experiences. It's not the individuals' particularities but through life stories it unravel what elements in general they contain (Bertaux, 1991). These studies also provides how to collect and analyze testimonial narratives, including suitable types of interviews and observation for research works. Some of these studies provides use of open ended questions, participant observations etc. Deriving from this methodological approach this study used open ended questions and multiple interview approach as this gives the participants enough room to openly narrate their experiences (Yow, 1994).

Material used in the articles based on the empirical study was collected in three different times, first field work begun from March 2015 to May 2015 at Vao center and some houses in Tartu and Tallinn where some of the respondents were housed by the government. Second field work started in December 2016 and was completed in January 2017 at Vao center, which is the house for Asylum seekers and refugees in Estonia was selected for field work. Third field work was carried out from April to May 2017 and a cricket field was selected for this field work where the Bangladeshi immigrants usually gather to play cricket.

Forty-eight refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants in Tallinn and Tartu were interviewed for this study. Interviews that were carried individually, were selected by

observing and also suggested by fellow refugees (Yin, 2003). They were women, men and their age ranged from sixteen to fifty years with the majority ranging from twenty to thirty years of age. Most participants were from South Asia, Middle Eastern or African Countries, that includes Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Sudan, Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Ivory Coast, Cameroon and also from Ukraine.

An inductive Thematic analysis has been used to analyzed the data as this study mostly focused of narrative materials of life stories, thematic analysis help building the philosophical background of interpretation (Yow, 1994), It also helps breaking the text into relatively units of content and submitting them to descriptive treatment (De Santis & Ugarriza 2000).)

Thematic analysis also suitable to answer the question of how do refugees spend their time? What are their experiences? Thematic analysis is well suited to analyze sensitive phenomena (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Thematic analysis is flexible and useful research tool, provides a rich and yet complex account of data (Yin, 2003). It helps finding a common threads that extend across the entire interview or set of interviews (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000). It can also be said that thematic analysis gives us pure qualitative in-detail and nuanced account of data.

Findings

Homeland as idyllic stories

Told stories were stated by the participants in connection to the nature of their detention center and also the accommodation center where they are placed afterwards. The argument can be placed that their glamorize memories on homeland could be the obstacle to adapt in Estonia (Islam, 2017). This analyses presents role of memories and the narratives in explaining refugees. Refugees are presented as significant agent with their own capabilities and resources; at the same time, it is to recognize that they have lost many things back home and that they have better experiences in the back of their mind. The outcome of this story telling and creating narratives was not viewed to prompted any policy making but to provide an insight about the ways refugees in Estonia think of their country and becomes narratives of adapting in Estonia as

Green(2004) pointed out that ‘A sense of coherent identity can be provided by composing our past’(40) . This study also tried to identify how their social connection at the detention center makes their story telling narratives on the host country.

Experiences that they have had in the past and present along with their identity and the creation of narratives are interconnected. Findings of this study suggest that participants being displaced from their own country and not being treated the way they portrayed a European country and to cope with a country, creates a narratives that could either make them feeling being marginalized, which is different from some other previous researchers (Fangen 2006; Ramsden & Ridge, 2012); which can be termed as double marginalized people, considering the fact that the traumatic feeling that they faced while being displaced from their homeland and at the same time many participants could create new narratives to help them to combine past and current situation to cope in a new land.

This study figures the point on how participants draw their past idealistic way. This might bring out the point of how this construction is important to adapt their present situation, where the narrative on their homeland becomes the source of the way of reestablishing themselves in a new country. This finding can be matched with findings that Eastmond (1993) and Chamberlain and Leydesdorff (2004) drawn in their researches pointing out that what is familiar is a means of coping.

Understanding of participant’s present experiences surrounding detention center and how they tell their stories on it and make it a negative narrative was the key point of the investigation and the level of being refugee became the central point of their told stories while asked on the experiences being refugee. This might be a point of healthy argument for the researchers who deals with refugees and also for the policy makers to figure how it can be dealt.

Heterogeneous presence

Gidden’s term appeared strong in impression through the South Asian Refugees (participants) of this study. They are selective of what they adapt in their cultural and social life and regarded as highly “south Asian” and extend their desire to adapt Estonian culture to a certain extent what they believe will be significant for them. They

admit what they have gone through being refugee and for existence they need to cope with different anticipation in a new society.

Refugee families and their reconstruction of their lives of individual preferences and differences of thinking level have been evident through this study that emphasizes heterogeneity of relatively homogenous participants which is meaningful through their daily life and practices. Whatever structures they carried in the form of religion and available to them in the form of education and decision making in a new society; they build it up and practice their agency through that to make their structure (Islam, 2016).

Sense of Collective (identity) and Individual (status)

Social gathering gave the participants collective identity and also it leads another question whether they were only constructing collective identity or they were constructing their individual status and identity?

Among the Bangladeshi immigrants subculture setting I would argue that yes it was in the first place for collective identity, but it also in a contrast view formed individual identity in many ways. Number of Bangladeshi respondent came to join this kind of gathering (Cricket match) to enjoy the recognition their individual status they would not find out side of this community.

To get the sense of individual status and to recover it by using immigrant's ethnic leisure subculture, we can see from the subculture theory's analyses which emphasize on the status problems. Cohen(1997) stated that "status problems are problems of achieving respect in the eyes of one's fellows" When a people or group of people do not get the recognition, they form small group that redefine them and make them more focus and give them status and identities through this kind of practices; Kim(2011) in his research shown that Koreans who were residing in New York were gathering in Korean church which provided middle class Korean to come together and share their mobility among themselves.

I would argue that immigrants' social gathering was more than collective or group solidarity, it facilitated individuals to get recognition through collective national identity building and group solidarity. However, there should not be a contraction that some of the participants did participate the gathering from national feeling or sense of belonging and be proud Bangladeshi. This however for many participants was the primary cause or attraction and through that group or individual identification can be achieved.

Religion as coping mechanism

Religious and spiritual aspects appeared a measure of adaptation while in exile or difficult situation. Sudanese narratives appeared very strong in spiritual aspects as

one respondents mentioned I am a Christian, so i know God has a purpose to send me', which can also be supported by the other studies. Religion is quite close to cultural aspect, thus create a guide of feelings, thoughts and somewhat associated with identity. It might sound as an individual coping strategy when it comes to religious beliefs but can be associated with societal and cultural aspects (Park and Aii, 2006). Participating religious activities can be associated with good mental health but on the other hand those faced persecution based on religion, in many instance it is not as good as for other groups. Sudanese refugees in Germany for instance prayed intensively for their country's situations to improve (Schweitzer et. al., 2007).

Conclusion

This study revealed how Refugees in Estonia portray their memories of their own country while in exile in order to create their present individuality in a new land and to adapt with a new culture. This study attempted to investigate refugees placed at refugee accommodation center and to analyze their present and past memories and stories for associating them with their coping mechanism. Using qualitative methods such as open-ended interviews and observation this dissertation brought out the argument that, in spite of being displaced from their homeland, refugees portray their country of origin via idyllic stories; family and community life are emphasized with the contrast of individualism. In light of the outcomes, this study brought out the facts that individual preferences and differences of thinking level among refugees in Estonia was evident and it is argued that they form heterogeneous presence in contrast to what they are being portrayed of mere victims or sufferers by general understanding.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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