The Structural Negligence of US Refugee Resettlement Policy

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Refugee policy in the United States operates on a principle of "calculated kindness," to use Loescher and Scanlan's (1986) now famous phrase. Kindness and hospitability toward refugees have been influenced by foreign policy concerns, domestic political battles and a cultural logic that generally considers adaptation to be a matter of economic independence and self-sufficiency. In this brief commentary, I aim to foreground the role anthropology can play in the formulation and implementation of refugee resettlement policies in the US. The neoliberal, utility maximizing, rational decision making model of personhood adopted by the resettlement regime remains largely inattentive to the experiences, cultures and capacities of incoming refugee cohorts. Contemporary US refugee resettlement policy defines adaptive success in terms that are different from those attributed to the notion by refugees themselves, and its practices often detract from its aims.

COMMENTARY

Contradictions in Resettlement Policy

Though conventional wisdom would have us believe that current policy is designed to facilitate refugees' integration into the neoliberal state, an ethnographically-informed perspective suggests that it includes elements that are inherently contradictory given stated policy objectives. US refugee resettlement policies do not always benefit the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free," as the inscription on the Statue of Liberty reads. A two-part survey report from May 1995 and April 1996, undertaken for the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) by Pamela Dimeo and Susan Somach in relation to Bosnian refugee resettlement, lays bare some of these contradictions.

Consider this: an important component of US refugee policy is the pre-arrival cultural orientation programs offered overseas for resettlement candidates to help them prepare for a particular idealized future. According to the CAL survey, after about two years in the US a large number of Bosnian refugees who attended a cultural orientation program in Croatia stressed that the program needed to more clearly explain "the positive and negative aspects to those awaiting departure for the US." Even more telling is the response, provided by almost half of those surveyed, that "life in the US was worse than they had expected." Survey respondents emphasized in particular the need for English language classes, the importance of realistic work expectations and the limited nature of financial and social assistance available to refugees after resettlement in the US.

Rapid Employment

One major component of US refugee policy is an emphasis on rapid employment. This emphasis is questionable on at least two grounds. First, without the language skills and guidance needed to secure well-paying jobs, rapidly employed refugees find themselves facing impossible odds to make ends meet. In many cases they have to work two or more jobs, disrupting family ties that otherwise serve as sources of moral support in an alien environment. "Life and work are hard as long as you don't speak English," a Bosnian refugee noted. If a refugee's chances of long-term success in the US are higher with increased English language fluency, policy must recognize that learning English should take precedence over rapid employment although it is initially time-intensive. The emphasis on rapid employment and the requirement to accept any job offer—which in most cases translates, in the words of another refugee, into "long working hours, low wages"—often have negative repercussions in terms of refugee families' economic, physical and emotional health and stability, as well as their acculturation. Language study opportunities provided by VolAgs (short for "voluntary agencies") and official bodies involved in the resettlement process can help refugees gain initial knowledge of English, but familiarity and confidence with speaking the language in everyday situations—a major factor of integration—takes time.

Second, the emphasis on rapid employment in practice leads to disregard for the skills that refugees carry over from their countries of origin. Without English language skills and the time to seek out opportunities and resources to acquire new credentials, capable doctors, engineers and professors frequently have to accept low-level jobs widely incommensurate with their past professional training and experience. This negatively affects self-esteem and psychosocial adjustment. Policy thus needs to better recognize that there is more to serving any refugee's needs than mere issues of biological survival and that short term solutions may not provide long term stability. What is at stake in the long run is no less than what Anthony Giddens calls "ontological security," described as "the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action" (*The Consequences of Modernity* 1990).

Looking Ahead, Looking Back

US refugee policy's front-loaded, future-oriented design—enmeshed in an indigenous logic of "American can-doism," which values work as long as its hardness is exclusively and self-referentially defined—results in a kind of structural negligence that also does not take into account the potentially perilous impacts of pre-resettlement variables. These factors (eg, number and intensity of traumatic events, years in refugee camps, encounters in countries of first asylum, loss of family members, the flight experience itself) can have dramatic effects on the success of resettlement efforts. Indeed, resettlement policy is misguided insofar as it continues to encourage refugees to only look forward, rather than back. Despite such encouragement, people do look back, carry over pain and resentments from the past, and interpret the present and anticipate the future in light of past experiences of violence and hardship.

Anthropology can guide refugee resettlement policy toward a much-needed recognition that establishing a life and new identity in the US is as much a matter of maintaining one's historical sense of self as it is one of adapting to psycho-social and economic challenges that lay ahead. The neoliberal work ethic hermetically seals possible avenues to socialization, emphasizes economic independence and self-sufficiency above all else and seems to expect refugees to continually rewrite their fates anew, never looking back at either their past jobs and skills or their past identities. Adaptation, an area of inquiry and site of contention in which the discipline has a vested interest, lies at the heart of the resettlement process, and policy would only benefit from anthropological expertise in that area.

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