When does a refugee stop being a refugee?

Missed Opportunities … Stories from the contact zone of settlement

Associate Professor Jane Haggis
School of International Studies
Faculty of Social and Behavioural Science
From stranger to citizen: racialisation at the contact zone of refugees and host country service providers

Investigators:

Jane Haggis, School of International Studies, Flinders University
Susanne Schech, School of International Studies, Flinders University

Funding: Australian Research Council Discovery Grant

Duration: 2006-2007

Location: one metropolitan city & one provincial center in southern Australia

Method: qualitative life history interviews with 37 refugees (ex TPV & IHSS); 29 service providers (NGO, government and volunteers) [66 in total]
Point 1: What is a refugee?

UN Convention

someone in need of a safe place from violence and conflict owing to 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.

Point 1: What is a refugee?

Popular/Political discourse
‘the West’: modern, affluent, secure, peaceful, organised, rational, equal – the normative benchmark of a quality modern life – Australian today.
‘the Rest’: not modern; under/un developed; abject; ‘third world’; poverty stricken; always in need of help; victims; objects of benevolence.

The refugee: poor, traditional, un(der) developed, victim, different
Point 2: Who are those who come?

Those who come often:

- Not abject; Not ‘poor’ or ‘third world’ stereotype in the way they view themselves
- Middling classes; see themselves as part of the global modern
  - Education, profession,
  - Cosmopolitan
  - Rational
  - Developed;
  - Shared values of democracy, rights and civility;
  - Respect; autonomy and agency

- To them ‘refugee’ means “in need of a safe space” - to rebuild, be welcomed, be recognised as what and who they are.
Point 3: What happens in refugee settlement?

Two different understandings of ‘refugee’ meet in the ‘borderlands’ of settlement:

– Misrecognition
– Misunderstanding
– Lost opportunities for the nation, for individuals, for communities

‘Refugee’ becomes a category of being and identity difficult to leave behind.
“We value the West as hope”.

Algore (40s, UNHCR, teacher; ancillary education worker)
“In my head, I saw a glare of hope. I said, I think that is where I can build again my life. I can start my new life in different ways because I’ve been in my own country and because of war and I couldn’t make it and I fled. Now, this is another opportunity.”

Allan (50s, BCom; Supermarket owner; ex TPV; casual labourer)
“I expected like, as Lebanese people they say, it’s my dreamland”

Jean (40s; demographer; UNHCR new arrival)
“When in the High Commission of Refugees they said I will do interview for Australia. I went to the internet to know more about Australia and when I saw history of Australia, how Australia live, how they live with their law, I trusted. Because I look for, the first I am looking for it is a place, a country where law can be again respected. Because in countries, our countries, many countries different, even they doesn’t have a law. You see everyone will do what they want, if he has money he can do what he wants but he has money.”

Nodir [40s; ex TPV; now interpreter]
“But the positive things are also lots of things, we never thought – if I compare my country with Australia so it is like a hell and heaven in a simple way, from everything, not only from just about freedom or this or that.
What’s in a name?

Algore (40s, UNHCR, teacher; ancillary education worker)

One thing which I very often think about is the word refugee. Why? Even if I’m in Australia, I’m called a refugee, because I’m a refugee, when I’m in refugee camp. I’m in Australia, in [town], says no refugee camp in [town]. Why am I called a refugee? Why is the Government cannot find another word, like permanent resident?

[Interviewer: or migrant?]

Or migrant, instead of refugee, because where you call me refugee, obviously you make difference between me and another person. If we read the Australian history, people who first came here, some of them were convict, but I don’t see anyone in Australia called convict or a sign of convict. They’re Australians. Why people like me are still called refugee?
[Soraiya, 40s]“I thought with my specialist as a microbiologist it will be very easy for me to find a job, no problem. With reasonable English language, I think I will be fine but, as I told you, it was really a big shock for me. […] And then the shock for me. When I tried to work at the hospital, because I thought it would be fine, it’s my, you know, what I got. They asked me to organise my qualifications to assist my qualifications. Okay, that’s fine. I did it and they told me, “Sorry, you have to assess – your qualification by study again.” Okay, where I have to study? You can’t study in [town] because there is nothing here in [town]. You have to go different area. I remember they sent me to about five different universities, […]. With myself with two children, a new arrival with nothing, […] I have to do something for ourselves because, as I told you, the first house for me was like a bad dream for me when I remember it. With all, you know, to be honest with you, second-hand furniture. It’s not my life; it’s not my life. So just I decided to change everything. […]

Allen – BCOM and ex supermarket owner in his 50s – casual labourer: ‘Our work now, it’s not really for Australian people. […] Just the animal … But we haven’t any choice”.

Being Middle Class
Friendship

Michael (32; ex TPV; welder)

That's right. I told you my own experience which really hurt me, and I say no, not good. One family was living in Sydney and they were very helpful with refugees and they were a very nice family. A very great family. One day I rang them, because I thought it was very bad if I didn't ring them and tell them that I am going to see my mother, and I took the phone and I say 'hello, I'm going to see my mother on travelling,' and she asked behind the phone and I was listening, 'he's working, he doesn't need money.' It just broke my heart. How can you feel someone ringing you just like a friend, and you are – because he thought I was asking, the husband for money, and say on the front of phone she say 'no, no, he's not needing money he's working.' I felt completely down and was upset.
‘It will be a good business’

Interviewer: Yes. So it gives you something that you think, with this passport, I have protection, I have some status.

Allan: Well say, for example, [my] brother, he told [me], when you become an Australian citizen, you can take your Australian passport, travel to China, as the easy way, and I can send for [you], anything for sale, it will be a good business. And [I] got some relatives in London, and they told [me], when you become an Australian citizen, you can come to London and we will help you to find a job.

Interviewer: So you may go to London?

Allan: [My] cousin, for example, he is a lecturer in London University. He is teaching economics.

Interviewer: So he could help you find a job in London?

Allan: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: Would you and all of your family go to London, or just you, or not sure?

Allan: First I see.

Interviewer: Yeah, you go and have a look.

Allan: And [I] got some neighbours, his children, they are working in London now .... Australian people.
Border Engagements

1. Anecdote from a health professional
2. Observations of workshops by a refugee support NGO to foster dialogue between service providers & case workers around issues of settling refugees from Africa.

Three dynamics identified:
• Structural multiculturalism – assimilate refugee into modernity
• Practitioner discourse of respect, accommodation and sometimes conflation of difference
• Resistant deployment of identity claims – bicultural worker
“Chocolate is a sometimes food”

Newly arrived parents packing chocolate products in children’s lunch boxes.
Why? Asked health professional.
Answer: advert on TV – good for you.
This is seen as an issue of ignorance about nutrition and good health but is it?
Or is it a question of critical literacies around consumer capitalism and commercial television?
The Family as border line

Refugee family:
- dysfunction
- trauma,
- Gender inequality
- Authoritarianism
- violence,
- tradition

Australian Family
- Functional
- Gender equality
- Democratic
- Non-violent
- nurturing

Developmentalist Incorporation
The Family as border line

‘African’ family:
inclusive, strong, a community focus and strong supportive networks’
everyone belongs to everyone else’
“Elders not counsellors”
“Elders are respected and listened to, considered family and society mediators. Courts of law are considered as a last resort”.

Australian Family Ideal type
Disruptive to ‘African’ family
Irrational
– therapy culture
– Autonomy of child (eg. Youth allowance)
‘Laws in Australia are very different’
‘get space for African values’

Culturally aware and receptive audience but no language beyond either compliance (legal dilemmas constraining cultural competency approaches) or development and modernization discourse
Opportunities not Costs

1. Recognise the modernity of the refugee
2. Adopt a mediatory rather than didactic approach; accommodation and negotiation
3. Recast the objectives of settlement: to maximise the potential of refugees to contribute to this nation – as functional individuals
Refugee Settlement: national investment not cost.

**Empower and Enable** re Australian institutions and how they work (employment, law, politics, welfare, education, )

**Recognise** existing skills (French speaking demographer; bio-chemist; teachers etc.)

**Leverage** Transnational networks

**Facilitate** entrepreneurial ‘get up and go’ outlooks.

**Respect** – negotiation, adaptation, mediation

**Pathways**
- Education top ups/access
- English language- better support and longer
- Support, advice and guidance for qualification recognition