

Experiencing Refugee Resettlement in America: Exploring the Impact of Generalized Policies and Services

by

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Abstract

The reality of the American experience for the newly resettled refugee does not always match the expectations of what the country has to offer. This paper focuses on a family of individuals from Burundi and how a generalized refugee resettlement policy of the United States government idealized ethnocentric ideas of self-sufficiency while creating barriers to their empowerment. The methodology used includes autoethnographic techniques which expose the assumptions, feelings, and subjectivity of the author. At the same time United States policy is reviewed within the context of the experiences and stories of resettled refugees. These policies generalized in their implementation and through the services they offer. The lack of reflexivity in United States refugee resettlement policy essentializes refugees to conform to popular representations of what refugees should be and how they should act. The implications of such a resettlement framework call into question the role power plays within the relocation and management of resettled refugee bodies, and what legal standing those bodies have before, during, and after the resettlement process.

Knowing little outside of pop culture references about refugees¹ and even less about refugees from Burundi my *modus operandi* for becoming a volunteer mentor at a refugee resettlement organization in Dallas, Texas must have been driven by at least a little curiosity. Inspired by the dynamic scenes and interpretations of the lives of these “resettled refugees” I hope to agitate further curiosity in understanding these individuals. To do so this paper takes place over the course of a day in the process of my research², which was conducted at the apartments of refugees I was assigned to mentor. During this chronological narrative I will use interludes to integrate how postindustrial institutions and refugee policy are relevant to my experiences with “resettled refugees.” By using a critical autoethnographic³ format I hope to avoid what Prem Rajaram described as, “bureaucratization of knowledge about refugees...creat[ing] a veneer of objectivity and dislocation designed to impart exhortatory information without problematizing the author’s position.”⁴

My theoretical perspective has been shaped by observing how “refugees” have been reclassified as “permanent residents”⁵ and the technologies of power which play into this idealized transformation. The mechanisms by which power is deployed resonate with what Michel Foucault termed biopower. The power over the lives of individuals identified as refugees is often maintained through their legal status as defined by an extensive international regime.⁶ I have come to understand the transformation of the legal status of “resettled refugees” to “permanent residents” as a mirror of the resettlement process itself. Namely, power is exercised through generalization and generalized expectations. These generalized expectations flow through me and the people I was assigned to mentor as well.⁷

My relationship with the family from Burundi began a year and a half ago with an email.

Hi Graham,

We’ve selected a family that can use your help and we’d like to introduce you as soon as possible. Please let me know when you have time to meet them and we will arrange it with the case manager. If it is on the weekend the case manager, Abdul Abbas, will talk with them before you arrive and let them know that you are coming. Once that has happened you can set your own schedule to visit 2-4 hrs per week for 4-6 months.⁸

The urban landscape along the four lane road in north Dallas is teeming with humanity. The sidewalk is a busy stream of amber, tan, black, brown, and the occasional pink bodies walking the mile or so that separate a dozen apartment complexes from the corner store, take-out food, and washateria-dominated strip malls closer to the highway.

“Check out the yard sale at those apartments” says Scarlett, my girlfriend of four years and co-mentor, from the passenger seat.

“Uh, are they using the iron fence to hang clothes and stuff on?” My question is only half rhetorical. The bars of the fence give the aesthetic of an outdoor pawn shop.

As I pull into the apartment complex where the family we mentor for “2-4 hrs per week” lives I am careful not to bottom out on the tall speed bumps in the parking lot which remind me of black manatees with deeply scarred backs.

“Put the camera under the seat,” I tell Scarlett. A graffiti tagged sign that reads “LOCK your car. TAKE your keys. HIDE your belongings,” always makes me more mindful of what can be seen through my car windows. As we walk up the stairs to the second story apartment a loose concrete slab which serves as a step tilts forward with our weight. I’ve told the manager, Hector, and the super, Vladimir, about the unsafe step. That was about a year ago.

“Damn it Scarlett, someone is going to get hurt.” We’re not even at the front door and I’m already reminded of how dilapidated these apartments are. The agreement signed between the U.S. Government and the resettlement organization I volunteer for stipulates that the housing provided to resettled refugees by the organization must be “decent, safe, and sanitary.”⁹ Considering the auto-theft warning signs, busted stairs, and the building-wide cockroach infestation that would make a Floridian blush they are 0 for 3.

When I knock on the door we hear a small commotion inside. Little kids yelling and shrieking, an adult laughing, the thud thud thud of sure feet on a thin floor. Scarlett and I are accustomed to waiting a minute or two before the door is opened. I don’t know if they are ever expecting us and I like how our relationship is laid back like this. A strict schedule that had everyone be somewhere at a certain time would make me feel too professional. After all, how could I feel professional with only an entire Saturday morning worth of training for this volunteer position?

As for the purpose of my field-work a strict schedule would seem to imply some sort of given functionalism in my attempt to repeat my position in time and space week after week. Scarlett and I already visit almost exclusively on Sunday as it is, and that is because there is a better chance everyone will be at the apartment or the vicinity. Liisa Malkki was making a valid point when she tied anthropology’s history of studying “local and closed systems” to the perception by some people that if the system was not closed, and individuals were mobile, culture is somehow lost or inaccessible.¹⁰ I have not found this to be the case with Jean, Yoness, Francois, Pierre, Amile, Marisa, Marie, and Willie, the family I was assigned to mentor, and now my good friends.

“I’m fine,” says Jean, the 38 year old father of five and husband to Yoness. “I’m fine,” is the only greeting he ever gives us when we ask “How are you?” We shook his hand and Yoness’ in between hugs from the children. Pierre, at 12 years old is the eldest child and only boy until Willie was born in the U.S. in July 2007, is not at home. The two bedroom apartment, which lacks a dining table, is scarcely room enough for the family, much less the guests that were over. There were four other adults over and a couple of kids. I was excited to spot Paul, who is from Uganda and in his late 30’s like Jean. I enjoy talking with him because of his impeccable English and wit.

“How is University?” Paul asked Scarlett and I.

“Going well,” said Scarlett. I smile that Paul remembered we were in school, as a few months have passed since we’ve seen him.

“Getting ready to graduate,” I added. “What did you get you degree in again Paul?”

“MBA, but I cannot use it in the United States.” Paul said at the bottom of his breath.

“I’m still driving trucks and trying to save money to get my family here and then go to Richardson Community College in Dallas.”

Paul impresses me. He has a plan and he sets goals to drive him toward it. Plus he has been in the U.S. for less than a year and his trucking job has taken him to all 48 contiguous states. He has even been on the Diane Reem show on National Public Radio as a call in commentator on the Kenya election debacle.

I’ve noticed that our conversation with Paul as quieted the rest of the room. No one else speaks English proficiently enough to warrant paying attention to the rapid fire back and forth questions that make up our conversation. Some of the kids do, but they are on the grungy carpet eating rice. Some are eating with their hands and some are seating with forks or spoons. The kids who eat with their hands sometimes grab food off of the other kid’s utensils. I smile at them but don’t try to move them up to the coffee table. There is just no space with everyone else crowded around it already taking up the couch, loveseat, and most of the wooden chairs.

“Where were you last week?” Scarlett asks Yoness. Scarlett has to repeat the questions a couple of times in different ways. “Last week, when we came, you were not here. Where were you?” and “Another person told us that your friend had a baby.” Yoness, Scarlett and I collectively turn to Amile, the 11 year old eldest girl of the family, to translate. The kids have had over a year of school in America so they are the de-facto translators during our visits.

“Yes...baby.” Says Yoness in English, laughing. “Boy or girl?” I ask, knowing that in Kirundi, their mother tongue, the pronoun for people is gender neutral.

“Boy,” Yoness pronounces it more like ‘buoy.’ She is black America like Willie.” Amile chimes in. “He” Scarlett and I correct Amile while we chuckle at her statement. I add “But you live in America too, aren’t you Black America?”

“No, I born in Tanzania, Pierre born in Burundi, not American, Africa.” Says Amile as Yoness follows the conversation with her eyes, picking up on the names of countries and people.

Amile’s answer did not surprise me in the sense that she said where her and her older brother were born. Jean had told Scarlett and I that Amile and her sisters Marisa, age 6, and Marie, age 3, were born in Tanzania at the refugee camp after I had been told by the refugee resettlement organization that they were all “from Burundi.” This time I was surprised when Amile denied that living in America made her “Black America.” Our objectification of refugees, from misinformation and generalized expectations that they were all “from Burundi” reduced the refugee experience to a series of national identities confounded by statelessness.¹¹

The opening front door turns my attention away from Amile and toward Rene, a man in his mid 60’s, who is smiling and nodding to people as he enters.¹² As I go to greet him and I almost immediately notice a 2nd degree burn covering a third of his hand.

“Water on stove, it fell down and,” SLAP! as Jean hit one hand on the other to signify the hot water burning Rene.

“I need to pub a bandage on it,” I tell Rene.

Rene shakes his head no, smiling, as he holds he burnt hand with the skin sloughing off toward me. I just had to insist again, hoping my assertiveness would cause him to just give in.

“No problem” Jean chimes in “No problem.”

All of a sudden Amile’s burn scars on her hands make sense by observing her dads attitude toward his friends burn. Rene’s refusal of a bandage leads me to reevaluate my self-perceived power and authority. Because the organization I volunteer with refers to refugees as “clients” my initial impression of this relationship was one that more reflected the service sector than friendship. I was to mentor, they were to learn. At the same time I feel odd that people who were given days or hours notice that they were being taken 12,000 miles away, assigned to a country to live in, then assigned again to a refugee agency, could be called “clients” as if they had perused the yellow pages and set this up themselves. Labeling resettled refugees as “clients” created uncertain obligations¹³ because they were not telling me, or the agency, what they needed.

Instead, we called them “clients” while at the same time telling them where they needed to be, what they needed to learn, and how they needed to work. As it turns out, calling refugees “clients” probably makes it easier to end the services provided to them because the resettlement agency assistance dries up after a maximum of six months of providing rent support, subsidized bills, food, and medical care.¹⁴ That is when “resettled refugees” are supposed to start planning to be “permanent residents,”¹⁵ ready or not.

Scarlett comes over to back me up. She moves closer to Rene, cradling his hand, and tells him we need to get burn cream and bandages. But we’re still not convincing him or Jean, who continue to smile and shake their heads back and forth. My concern for Rene is matched by feelings that I am being accepted as someone who does not always have to be listened to, rupturing the provider/client dichotomy. Getting past this notion of servicing a “client” makes me feel more of a part of the social group at Jean’s apartment this morning, even as Rene’s hand begs infection.

The four of us move away from the door where we were standing and back to the love seat, couch and a set of five wooden straight backed chairs to find a seat around the crowded coffee table. I pick up the three hand held dry erase boards and markers and ask Lucie and Benoit, some visiting friends, if they would like an English lesson.

I have had no formal English instruction training so I start where I think most people would start: the letter ‘A.’ Benoit and Lucie make their ‘A’ and we progress through the English alphabet. Benoit was on his game, drawing each letter quickly, centrally placed on the board and when he showed me the finished product his eyes did not ask for confirmation of a job well done but rather seemed to say “what next?” Lucie took a little longer because she would look up to see my board before she drew each line. Her letters were mostly recognizable, but some such as ‘p,’ ‘q,’ and ‘d,’ got confused. Benoit would lean over to help her when he was done.

“Has she gotten to go to any English school in America?” I ask Amile to ask Lucie knowing that “English school” is how Amile translates ESL (English as a second language).

“No,” says Amile. “No Swahili, only Kirundi.”

Lucie only speaks Kirundi. She was not able to learn Swahili while living in the camp in Tanzania.¹⁶ Considering the camp they were put in is on the side of a mountain and they were only allowed to leave to collect firewood from time to time it is hard for me to imagine an environment that would facilitate learning.¹⁷ Unfortunately for Lucie Swahili is the common language of translation for refugee service organizations in Dallas, Texas. I asked if Lucie was going to “English school” because I knew Yoness did not go either, and she also did not speak Swahili.

I told a volunteer coordinator, Sharon, about refugee women I know who are not involved in the voluntarily ESL and cultural education classes. Sharon said that their absence made sense because the classes were in Swahili and attended by Swahili speakers. She also asked me how long they had been in the Tanzanian refugee camps. “Oh, since the mid 90’s.” I replied. “Well, they must have really not wanted to learn Swahili.” Sharon riposted, trailing off into a laugh. I should note this attitude was not something I had heard before from Sharon or anyone else in the organization, and her laughter seemed to indicate this was more of a joke than genuinely blaming the victim. This might have been her way, as someone who I feel genuinely cares about her “clients” and their success in the U.S., to deal with the inability to reach out to those individuals who only speak and understand Kirundi. But no matter why Sharon said that, my understanding is that the essentialized refugee is susceptible to generalized expectations, both in the refugee camp and after resettlement.¹⁸

As I continued to work with Lucie and Benoit I can’t help but to feel my frustration building due to my inability to speak and understand Kirundi. While this is much more difficult than talking to Paul, who in the meantime had gone to his apartment, I am still impressed by whatever progress can be achieved in our short visits each week. I decide to draw dotted outlines of letters for Lucie to trace over to build her muscle motor memory. However, before I am done with my dotted outline she has already started copying what I am doing, except her ‘D’ is backward and built like a split level house.

“Here, take my board,” I say as I offer my dry erase board to Lucie. I ignore that she cannot understand that command in English but know she might pick up on my suggestive tone. I take her dry erase board in return and motion to draw over the dotted lines. After I demonstrate again she draws over them. Success in our mentoring often comes through a combination of tone of voice and non-verbal communication. Unfortunately that is not the kind of success which facilitates negotiating a lease for a new apartment or getting directions on how to use city transit.

However true that previous snide sentence is it also begs the question: What kind of “success” are we looking for? Success for the refugee resettlement organization might be to keep everyone alive and employed to get through the six month obligation of support as per the conditions of government funding.¹⁹ Success for Scarlett and me is to visit once a week, deal with whatever presents itself these few hours, and then return home knowing we might have helped. In other words, the terms of success, and thus the expectations of these resettled refugees, are generalized beyond specificity for the needs of the individuals.

Today, however, I was on a mission to meet some individual requests as well as some of my constructed needs of these resettled refugees.

“Scarlett, can you take over the dry erase boards and English lesson? I need to go set up the computers.” By putting an essential need after my question I don’t give Scarlett much wiggle room to say no.

I had bought a couple computers for Jean's family and one other family the previous week. My friend Andrew, who works at a refugee resettlement organization in the Pacific Northwest, told me how valuable the computers have been for getting the kids and adults technologically savvy. Also, with typing programs and English education software like Rosetta Stone, they have options for learning on a flexible schedule. I scoped out Craigslist for computers and ended up contacting a guy named Hughy. The computer systems (CPU, monitor, keyboard, mouse, and software) are only \$40-\$60 each.

I had gone back to Hughy's apartment in Garland this week to pick up three more systems. Hughy lives with his wife, sister, sister's boyfriend, mom, and three or four kids in a three bedroom apartment. One bedroom is dedicated to nothing but computers and parts. They buy computers in bulk from companies that are upgrading their systems, then refurbish them, then sell them. They do this out of a storage unit and their apartment. It is a 21st century cottage industry.

As Hughy was getting the computers ready to go I was talking to Hughy's wife, Sara, about how they got into the computer business. She told me about the Cuban food restaurant they ran as a family until a few years back when they sold it to buy a used car lot because Hughy is a mechanic. The land the car lot was on and the land that they lived on in New Orleans was not covered by flood or wind insurance due to the location being prone to hurricanes, as Katrina so fatally proved. The car lot was put under 10 feet of water and they lost their entire inventory. I asked what she thought of North Texas and Sara said she enjoyed having a Wal-Mart so close but had no idea how big the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex was before she was moved here. They want to start up a used car lot, but don't have the collateral to get a Small Business Association loan. So they are selling me computers at a cut rate price.

Back at the apartment I'm getting ready to break out the computers. "Hey Benoit, are you ready to go set up the computer?" I ask while handing his dry erase board to Yoness.

"Aaaaaaiiiyeeeeee aaaahaaaahaaaahaaa," Yoness laughs in the 80db range as I hand her the dry erase board. I catch her off guard while she is on the floor nursing Willie and talking on the phone. Almost any interaction with Yoness, Marie, and other Burundian women starts off with a smile or laughter. Often times our mere presence at the door on Sunday morning or afternoon is enough to elicit a short burst of jollity.

As I rise from the couch during Yoness' outburst Benoit takes the cue and gets up as well. Benoit is one of the three people that asked me for a computer last week. I didn't have money to buy computers for everyone so I asked if they would be cool with paying \$40 each. "No problem," was the consensus after I convinced them I was not saying "\$400 each."

“Where do you live?” I ask as we are walking outside. Benoit has his bike so I’ll have to follow him slowly in my car to his apartment.

“Roundrock Apartments,” replies Benoit while he points north to the apartment complex abutting the one Jean and Yoness live in.²⁰

“O.K. I’ll follow you there.” My statement is at least partially misunderstood as Benoit cocks his head to one side and squints as if blocking out the noon sun would increase his ability to comprehend what I just said.

“You go, then I go.” I point at him when I say “You,” then to the apartment when I say “go.” And with that we are off like a herd of turtles.

Arriving at Benoit’s apartment complex, which I have visited before but never to see him, I notice the green grass, working security fence, and an aesthetic appeal I don’t feel toward Jean and Yoness’ apartment complex. Recently Jean and Yoness applied for a government subsidized apartment in West Dallas. However when the agency which contracts out the apartment management came to inspect Jean and Yoness’ current residence they concluded that these particular resettled refugees did not qualify because they had not; “evidenced an ability and/or willingness to care for an apartment to the standards established in our lease, regarding safety, cleanliness, and/or maintaining the good condition of the unit.”²¹

If Jean and Yoness’ apartment was not suitable for the inspectors I have a feeling that Benoit’s might be. Benoit, his wife, sister, and mother, plus a number of kids live in a three bedroom apartment. There are no clothes or food on the floor, the kitchen counter is wiped clean and not cluttered with dishes of day old food, and no milk is sitting out to ripen into homemade yogurt.

They choose to put the computer on a glass table in the living room, which also has two couches and two recliners. We have to move some plush stuffed animals out of the way and I am momentarily worried the glass table top might break. However my fears are unfounded as the computer gets set up without incident. I instruct Benoit where to plug everything in at so he has some cognizance with how to link the monitor, keyboard, mouse and CPU together.

Soon a crowd of about 10 people ranging from 4 years old to perhaps over 60 years old gather around the computer as I instruct Benoit’s wife how to navigate Rosetta Stone.

“OK, well are you doing this *for* them or *with* them.” The words of a staff member of the resettlement agency echo in my ears from a prior visit to her office as I am surrounded by the curious faces of first time computer users. I think how irrelevant and impossible that statement is to distinguish at a time like this, even if I outright give the computers to Benoit like I did “for” Jean and his friend’s family. This staff member’s allusion to what is also called “dependency syndrome”²² reflects an attitude and belief that doing things “for” people, or resettled refugees in this case, keeps them forever attached to the support structure.

Within the body of refugee literature one does not have to search long to find the implications of the “dependency syndrome” attitude. Indeed, it is United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) practice that refugee camps maintain the minimum services to protect life in order to avoid turning a “camp” into a permanent settlement.²³ The aversion to “dependency syndrome” turns from a minimal provision of services for sometimes many years at the refugee camp²⁴ to the a six month time limit on a broader range of services during resettlement. Additionally, by medicalizing the idea of “dependence” into a “syndrome” the perceived phenomenon is placed within the realm of post industrial institutional control. Functioning similarly to a clinic, the refugee resettlement agency prevents any instances of this dangerous syndrome by generalizing their services and limiting support to a generalized timeframe. It is this prevention that is necessary to complete the idealized transformation of dependent resettled refugees into self-sufficient residents.

One of the explanations for this fear of “dependency syndrome” among those charged with assisting resettled refugees is tied directly to U.S. government funding of their services. Specifically the federal government policy that the “principal objective of the resettlement plan shall be assisting the refugee to obtain early employment.”²⁵ This is complemented in the same section of the Reception and Placement Agreement by giving the resettlement organization the task of “discussing the importance of self-sufficiency in American society,” with each “employable refugee.”²⁶ Thus the “principal objective” of the resettlement agency, as defined by the U.S. federal government, explains how and why “dependency syndrome” must be prevented.

Of course Benoit and Jean have jobs. They had jobs within their first month of living in the U.S., even though they did not speak more than a few words of English. Of course these jobs were practically assigned to them, as their employers get tax credit for each resettled refugee they employ.²⁷ This tax credit is similar to the \$16.77 the resettlement organization receives from the federal government for each hour I volunteer.²⁸ Thus Benoit, Jean, and myself share more than just our experiences together. We share government subsidized positions within our jobs and volunteering that are more valuable economically to our employers than the services we provide. So perhaps the question those concerned with preserving “American self-sufficiency” should be asking is: who exactly is dependent on whom?

As I stand with the crowd around the computer, now watching a boy maybe 10 or 11 years old play Pinball 3D, I see the intense focus and unusually quiet demeanor that has descended upon the small living room full of people.

“Have you used a computer before?” I query the crowd but focusing my eyes on anyone appearing younger than 20.

“Yes, in school,” Says a boy who must be in High School as a couple of other kids nod in agreement.

“Can you help teach people how to turn it on and off and use the programs?” I ask hopefully. I get a couple of people to nod in affirmation their eyes are fixed on the flickering screen.

“OK I’m going to go to Jean’s, call me if you need anything.” As I’m talking to Benoit I make a fist then extend my thumb and pinky to signify a phone. “Call me,” I say again.

Back at Jean’s Scarlett is sitting on the couch with a pile of Amile’s and her younger sister Marisa’s homework on her lap. Our eyes meet and I slightly jerk my head toward the door, using a non-verbal to ask Scarlett if she is ready to go. However Yoness picks up on my not so subtle gesture.

“Go home?” She asks as she tilts her head to one side.

“Yes,” Scarlett says, answering both Yoness’ and my question at the same time. “We will come back next week.” I quickly add. “Monday?” Says Yoness, head still cocked to the side as she stands in front of the kitchen entrance with her giant wooden cooking spoon from Tanzania in her left hand. “Sunday,” Scarlett and I say at almost the same time.

“Ohhhhhhhhhh...Sunday,” Says Yoness as she puts down the fufu spoon and comes and hugs us. We also exchange parting hugs with the kids and handshakes with Jean and a few of his friends that are still over visiting.

As we are driving home I ask Scarlett what she did while I was gone for an hour.

“Well right after you left Pierre came over with his friend and they started playing the original Super Mario Brothers game. They were not good at all, they kept falling down even the smallest holes.”

“I doubt they have ever played video games before,” I said in defense of the boys while laughing and checking the rear view mirror as we merged onto the highway.

“So I wanted to show them how to play. I sat down and got through the first stage of the first level. The boys were really impressed, they were like ‘WOW! You WIN?!?! You finished! You’re Good!’” Scarlett imitated the boys with excitement in her voice. “And you know what?” “What?” I asked, answering the rhetorical question. “Even though it was the easiest part of the first Mario Brothers game ever made I felt...I was like, YEAH! I am good!”

Both Scarlett and I agree that mentoring and visiting with our resettled refugee friends made us feel good about ourselves in ways we could not achieve in any other setting. Who among our friends would be impressed by beating Mario Brothers level one or our ability to type without looking at the keyboard? And yet when I envision the poor, fly covered masses of emaciated Black people that are so often essentialized as the ideal refugees²⁹ these feelings of self-confidence and achievement are the last thing I would expect them to impart on me. These essentialized idealizations are so difficult to see past that even after more than a year with Jean, Yoness, family and friends I still find myself employing them. For example, it was not until I was doing coding for this research that I realized I had failed to see Hughy, Sara and their extended family as resettled refugees thanks to Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent forms of violence following that catastrophe. But of course internal refugees are not readily recognized as a political reality in the United States.³⁰ Denial of the existence of internal refugees complements the essentialization of what a refugee is supposed to be.³¹

However much of the similarities of their situations are denied by conventional legal definitions both Hughy and Jean have been entered into a generalized process which has resulted in similar impediments to advancement. The reality of Hughy’s declined Small Business Association loan application and Jean’s declined new apartment application are both base on resettlement limitations which have placed these individuals into biopolitical catch-22s. Jean was moved into a dilapidated apartment, yet he is expected to “demonstrate the ability” to keep it “clean and safe” in order to acquire better living conditions for his family. Hughy has lost all of his property and inventory yet he is expected to post collateral as per the demands of the Small Business Association which the U.S. government directed him to as a Katrina “evacuee.”

These individuals have been entered into a resettlement process where power is exerted through ideology to create generalized solutions and expectations. The creation of a “client” is not only the first step in making the “resettled refugee” into a “permanent resident” but it also facilitates the dominating theme³² of “self-sufficiency” throughout the resettlement process. The U.S. federal government wants to see docile bodies of these “clients” hard at work, chasing the American dream. The resettlement agency wants these docile bodies speaking Swahili and attending ESL classes for six months before they are cut off for fear of catching “dependency syndrome.” I also wanted these docile bodies learning English, keeping a “clean and safe” house, and accepting whatever help I decided they needed. All of these generalized scenarios of the resettled refugee experience seem to be more manageable than seeing individuals outside of our idealized expectations of what a refugee is and what they are supposed to do after they are resettled.

Endnotes

¹ Some common knowledge of refugees for my peers and I is that refugees make good music re: *The Fugees*, and quickly climb the socioeconomic ladder of drug lords re: *Scarface*.

² McGee and Warms 2008 pp. 532-535 address the issues of moving toward postmodern processual interpretations of reflexivity, deconstruction and interpretation.

³ Carolyn Ellis 2004 pp. 126 presents several methods for validation of ethnographic methods. Thus my analysis will be supported “by relying on [field notes], memory, editing, and selecting verbatim prose out of context and then surrounding it with [my] constructed analytical context.”

⁴ Prem Kumar Rajaram 2002 pp. 248 Rajaram writes a critical review of how humanitarian organizations, using Oxfam as a specific example, filter the narratives of refugee experiences in order to make the stories portray “helplessness and loss.”

⁵ Collins and Mamgain 2003 pp. 117 After 12 months in the U.S. refugees are no longer considered “refugees.” They are then legal permanent residents. After five years of permanent residency they may apply for citizenship.

⁶ Simon Turner 2004 points out that governments hand over the control of their fleeing and “refugee” citizens to the international community. Liisa H. Malkki 1995 pp. 506 “This international regime itself seems particularly important to study now. Having grown from the domesticated version of the world community that Cooper described...this regime produces the social, political and legal constructions that we now recognize as refugeeness.”

⁷ One of the first things I did when I learned I would be mentoring refugees from Burundi is check out a book on Swahili. Turns out most of them didn’t speak Swahili and I had so wrongly anticipated the relationship I was entering that the language book was soon returned to the library.

⁸ Email to the author from the volunteer coordinator of the nonprofit resettlement agency. September 2006.

⁹ FY 2008 Reception and Placement agreement between the U.S. Government (Health and Human Services) and the “recipient” outlines that “basic needs” (housing, furnishings, food, clothing, appropriate health programs, school registration, and transportation to job interviews) must be met to get the government funding for providing settlement services to refugees.

¹⁰ Malkki 1995. pp. 509.

¹¹ Prem Kumar Rajaram 2002. pp. 251 “Rather than being understood as the temporal manifestation of particular historical processes, the state acts as the ultimate receptacle into which these processes—of the constitution of identity, heritage, kinship—are channeled.”

¹² Opportunities for research abound in the individual lives of resettled refugees. Older men from Burundi were often the oral historians and took the preservation and purification of the Hutu identity upon themselves. (Malkki Purity and Exile 1995) Work could be done post-resettlement focusing on the roles these older men continue to play in their communities.

¹³ Dorsh Marie de Voe 1981 pp. 90 “The face-to-face denial of obligatory aspects contained in the relationship between members of organizations engaged in the charitable servicing of refugees and their clients forms an insistent, binding, paradoxical structure within which neither party has a chance for graceful escape.”

¹⁴ The Reception and Placement agreement stipulates that rent, food, health and living services be provided to refugees for only their first six months, as this is when the government would stop funding the organization with resettlement funds.

¹⁵ see 3.

¹⁶ Marc Sommers 2001 pp. 72 Cited a statistical sample by Daley which showed 67% of Burundi women in the Tanzanian Refugee camps did not speak Swahili and many of them also never left the camps.

¹⁷ Beth Whitaker 2002 pp. 341-342

¹⁸ Uma Segal and Nazneen Mayadas 2005 pp. 564. This generalization is further reflected by the lack of agency allowed to refugees during the resettlement process. “Refugees are selectively resettled in the United States and other nations based on guidelines defined by the host country.”

¹⁹ Audrey Singer and Jill Wilson 2006 pp. 4

²⁰ Barbara E. Harrell-Bond 1989 pp. 48 The article goes on to point out that “dependency syndrome” is a term often deployed to argue that refugees are not refugees at all but simply “economic migrants, opportunists, and even ‘fortune seekers.’” This line of thinking is parroted every time Haitian ‘boat people’ become a story in the corporate news cycle.

²¹ From the letter of denial sent to Jean. February 2008.

²² Barbara Harrell-Bond 1989 pp. 48 “The language used in the literature produced by humanitarian agencies in discussing refugee issues reflects attitudes and beliefs which in turn are used to justify action...[W]e learn from this literature that that refugees can be manipulated by the ‘pull factor,’ suffer the ‘dependency syndrome’...”

²³ Gaim Kibreab 1993 pp. 322-325

²⁴ The “1972 Burundians” have been refugees since that year and resettlement of the last 10,000 of these refugees and their families began in 2005

²⁵ FY 2008 Reception and Placement agreement between the U.S. Government and resettlement organization. Article II Section 2.5 g.

²⁶ FY 2008 Reception and Placement Agreement Article 1 Section 1.4 h defines “employable refugee” as any refugee between the ages of 18 and 64 unless they have a child “under one year of age or other fully dependent person...or is unable to work for...health reasons.”

²⁷ FY 2008 Reception and Placement agreement between the U.S. Government and resettlement organization.

²⁸ Email from volunteer coordinator at resettlement organization. December 2007.

²⁹ I am speaking from personal anecdotal evidence as someone who grew up in upper-middle class suburbs exposed to refugees only on Sally Struthers commercials or when conditions for fleeing humanity were so horrific they made in national evening news.

³⁰ Liisa Malkki 1995 pp. 503 Malkki goes on to say “If said rich countries do not have ‘a refugee problem’ within their borders, this fact is clearly not a simple accident of geography or history.”

³¹ Liisa Malkki 1995 pp. 501 “The most universally cited part of the basic legal definition of refugee status is as follows: ‘The term refugee shall apply to any person who...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’ 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.”

³² FY 2008 Reception and Placement agreement between the U.S. Government and resettlement organization makes at least 8 independent mentions of the importance of employment and self-sufficiency of the refugee. Even going so far requiring the resettlement organization report to local welfare offices the employment status of refugees and having refugees pay back the full cost of their plane ticket to the United States.

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