Agency, structure, and reflexivity in displacement:
The experience of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Germany

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Abstract

This article, based on 18 months of fieldwork in Lebanon and Germany, proposes a theoretical conceptualization of the interactions between agency, structure, and reflexivity in displacement. The research on which this paper is based looks at Syrian displaced families and explores the specificities of refugees' agency. I argue that the specific conditions within which Syrian refugees act in Lebanon and Germany make them experience a suspended life. This condition is expressed by the concept of 'liminality', which functions as a non-structure and creates a framework in which alternative dimensions of agency and reflexivity can be exercised.

Introduction

The concept of 'agency' is a key term in sociology and has a long-standing tradition in the academic debate. Investigating agency and its interplay with 'structure' helps understand whether human beings are free to act and to make their own choices. Nevertheless, agency is not only observable action per se. It can be conceptualized as a nuanced set of visible and non-visible actions. Anthropologist Naila Kabeer sees it as "the meaning, motivation and purpose, which individuals bring to their activity" (Kabeer 1999: 438). Agency is the process through which choices are made and put info effects. It can take different forms, including resistance, negotiation, bargaining, deception, manipulation, and subversion.

In refugee studies, agency refers to the potential of displaced people to overcome the structures of displacement and gain positive outcomes from a crisis. Making agency central in refugee studies helps to contrast essentialist representations of the refugee as a victim or a passive recipient of relief aid (Essed et al. 2004: 2). The circumstances set by forced migration are particularly significant to observe the interaction between agency and structure, as displacement creates specific social, economic, geographic, political, and legal obstacles for people. Nonetheless, it is perhaps even more noteworthy to notice what happens when people experience a protracted-temporary displacement, which can be conceptualised as a non-structure. How is agency exercised in a non-structure? In what follows, I first outline the peculiarity of Syrian refugees' agency in Lebanon and Germany, I then explore how protracted-temporary displacement is experienced by Syrian families in these two countries, and finally, I question whether there is a space for reflexivity in refugeehood.

The specificities of refugees' agency

Previous literature has argued that the specificity of refugees' agency is determined by the specificity of the structures that people encounter in their condition of displacement (Oskay, 2016; Healey 2006). As a matter of fact, forced migration poses specific social, economic, geographic, political, and legal obstacles to people's everyday life. Some of those can be for example the dire living conditions of the refugee camp; people's damaged relationship with their home country (Oskay, 2016: 45); the transformation of social identity when a person 'becomes' a refugee; or their legal status in the country of asylum. However, limiting the analysis to certain structural contexts can be reductive and would exclude other categories of structures. For example, in Lebanon, only a minority of Syrian refugees live in refugee camps (Carpi & Şenoğuz 2019), but this does not mean that they do not experience specific dire living conditions. In Germany, most Syrian nationals have been granted a form of humanitarian protection, but not all of them have a damaged relationship with their home country. For this reason, it is crucial to approach forced displacement within a wider perspective, which captures the diversity of the refugee experience. In my

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observation, as displacement experiences are very diverse for Syrian refugees it is not possible to ascribe the distinctiveness of refugees' agency within specific social, economic, geographic, political, and legal structures. Rather, I consider that what determines the peculiarity of Syrian refugees' agency is the state of temporary-protracted displacement wherein which they act in those two countries. This condition creates a state of 'liminality' (Turner, 1969), a transition from one status to another, which generates "violence, humiliation and reconfiguration" (Turner, 1967). In modern societies this space in the edges of structures "escapes ritual moments and becomes more pervasive, capturing people in a prolonged state of 'in-betweenness' without necessarily providing closure to the period of crisis" (Gold, 2019: 16). In this sense, the condition of liminality functions as a non-structure, because it creates a non-space and non-time that that leaves individuals in a suspended state.

Syrian refugees' protracted-temporary displacement is engendered by the specific legal and bureaucratic framework wherein Syrians stand in displacement. In Lebanon, Syrians are not accepted as asylum seekers or refugees because Lebanon is not a signatory state of the 1951 Refugee Convention (Janmyr, 2017). This is a dimension of temporality because Syrian refugees are not allowed to legally resettle in Lebanon, but at the same time, the real conditions of their stay are permanent because they have no alternative solution for a safe return to their homes in Syria, or for resettlement in a third country. Similarly, in Germany, Syrian refugees experience a temporary-protracted displacement as they are mostly granted subsidiary protection. This is a temporary form of protection that does not ensure the same benefits as the full refugee status, including the right to family reunification. For this reason, the legal and political framework of Germany also holds Syrian refugees in a dimension of temporality, while being in a permanent displacement. In both countries protracted-temporary displacement makes Syrian men and women live "betwixt and between" (Turner, 1967).

This state of liminality is experienced differently by Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Germany. While in Lebanon Syrian participants described this condition as a suspended state connected to feelings of disorientation, bewilderment, and loss (ḍayā'), in Germany participants described it as a waiting state experienced with feelings of anticipation (intiẓār). In Lebanon, Abū Qāīs, a sixty-years old man from Daraya, expressed his feeling of ḍāya' many times in our conversations. After forcibly migrating to Lebanon, in 2013, he was no longer able to provide for his family, as he was doing before in Syria. My fieldnotes provide a photograph of this sense of suspension and disorientation experienced by Abū Qāīs.

Ward told me that her father often says that he feels like furniture in this house… "I am like a chair," he says. That is not only because he is not working and he feels useless, unable to provide for his family, but also because he is not the centre of the family life anymore. His wife does not sit with him to have lunch anymore, she waits for Ward to come back from work and she eats with her. Ward's mother seems to no longer recognise the authority of her husband and now appears to account Ward's role of breadwinner in the house[2].

Abū Qāīs felt lost, disoriented, and suspended in a space that he did not recognise as his own. He felt 'like furniture' in the house because he had no space left where to express his gendered identity. He lost his role as patriarch in the family. In this sense, Abū Qāīs remained in-between spaces because unable to gain a new social space.

In Germany, the condition of liminality was distinctively expressed by Abū Moḥammad, a participant from Hama. He arrived in Germany in 2015 and left his wife and children behind, in Syria, in hopes of reuniting with them in the not-too-distant future. Unfortunately, because the process of family reunification can last for many years, he is still waiting today. For this reason, Abū Moḥammad felt suspended in a waiting state (bintiẓār), which he experienced with feelings of continuous anticipation (intiẓār).

When I talk to my wife in the evening, we always imagine how our life will be when she comes

here. I tell her that we will go to the park to make a BBQ, or to the cinema – we have never been to the cinema together! Oh my God, I cannot wait for her to be here and for our life to finally *start*![3]

This state of temporality within a protracted dimension makes Abū Moḥammad experience a suspended life because his real life will 'start' only after he will be able to reunite with his wife and children – an event for which Mohammad has no control over.

Is there a space for reflexivity in refugeehood?

Reflexivity is a mediating mechanism between structure and agency (Archer, 2003). It is built on the idea of an inner conversation based on a relation between the individual and society. Whether this capacity can be applied to refugeehood largely depends on the specific conditions and time in which refugees act. As the experience of Syrian refugees is very diverse, it is perhaps not possible to claim that refugees can or cannot practice social reflexivity. In general terms, we could say that the condition of 'bare life' would not allow for reflexivity to take place, as daily survival is the priority. In this case, basic needs are overriding the inner conversation because there is no space to fully elaborate on future aspirations, projects, goals, or social circumstances. Nonetheless, because the refugee experience is not monolithic, and because the state of liminality functions as a non-time and non-space, I observed that various forms of reflexivity are possible in displacement. One example is 'religious reflexivity', which I observed among Syrians in Germany. This is a form of reinforcement of religious practices and beliefs in a framework of self-construction of a new identity in displacement. In Lebanon, I found reflexivity in people's projections of 'possible selves' (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954), or reflexive projections of new identities that can serve to overcome everyday insecurities and frustrations of life in displacement.

Conclusion

Agency, in displacement, is temporally embedded as it incorporates different elements connected with time, including habitual aspects, the capacity to imagine alternative future possibilities, as well as the capacity to contextualize past habits and future projections (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 962). Placing agency in a temporal framework of analysis helps understand how actors respond to changing circumstances and environments and how they reconstruct their understanding of their experience of displacement. In Lebanon and Germany, Syrian families exercised alternative dimensions of agency to deal with the transformations of gender roles and to renegotiate gender relations. In particular, through the employment of agency, Syrians engendered different varieties of doing gender and family: they rejected traditional gender roles in the private space while maintaining those roles in the public space; they avoided taking on new gender roles in the public sphere but accepted them in the private space; they performed new gender roles both within the family and within the wider society; and they maintained traditional gender roles both inward and outward.

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[3] Interview with Abū Moḥammad, a Syrian refugee man displaced in Germany. March 4, 2019.

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