Voices to be heard? Reflections on refugees, strategic invisibility and the politics of voice

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Introduction

As part of the ESRC-funded ‘Becoming Adult’ research project – a longitudinal study focused on unaccompanied minors and their perception of well-being – the team engaged in a brief theatrical exercise in which we were to act out our feelings in relation to our migratory experiences. Many of us engaged with our own interpretation of some of the themes, such as ‘loneliness’, ‘being invisible’ and ‘having no one to speak to’. While some of us reflected on the common experiences of being lonely, or being misunderstood by wider society, others expressed a preference for invisibility. In this scenario, there were two interpretations of ‘invisibility’: one that was enforced by society and institutions, whereas the second one was a strategic choice to be invisible in the realms of refugee discourses and representations. During the exercise, I was struck by the differences in our interpretations. In my previous experience of discussions around refugeehood in my community, there was often the desire to almost hide the refugee identity in public spaces. On the other hand, during the exercise, few of us expressed the desire to be seen, under the light of refugeehood or migration stories.

These contrasting interpretations defy the homogenization of refugee identities, in which the nuances of culture, religion and gender within the refugee experiences are often overlooked. The theatrical example and the differences in approaches to refugee experiences represent the various ways in which refugees may choose to engage with their ‘refugee’ label, and exercise agency in more nuanced ways. For some,
strategic invisibility meant making an active choice – to avoid the stigma that comes with the label of refugee, but mostly also to avoid being seen through the monolithic lens of the refugee label. Strategic invisibility is a concept that particularly attracted my attention, due to my intersecting identities of being Black, female and migrant, which draw hyper-visibility, and my sensitivities with regard to migration narratives in the media and academia. I am interested in exploring how multiple intersecting identities such as mine can sometimes render individuals (involuntarily) hyper-visible within narratives that are not always representing true selves or identities. Most importantly, I am interested in how individuals can resist such narratives and create a safe space for themselves.

In wider debates in the media, the public arena or academia, notions of refugee agency and voice are often addressed through the binaries of speechlessness and political participation. On the one hand, there is an extensive debate on the need for refugees to ‘claim their voices’ and much criticism of the ways in which refugees (especially in the context of refugee camps) are misrepresented by various organizations, in ‘speechless’ or ‘powerlessness’ forms (Malkki, 1996). On the other hand, there is also extensive evidence of the political participation or activism of refugees, demonstrating their abilities to represent their voices and demand that institutions become accountable for their own actions. For instance, the case of Sudanese refugees’ appraisals in Cairo, where they demanded better operation from the UNHCR, is often discussed as a case study to demonstrate the consequences of refugee demands for accountability for the ways in which they are handled and treated by states or international organizations (Sigona, 2014).

In this chapter, I aim to explore other, more nuanced, ways in which refugees can exercise their agency. I argue that refugee voices do not always take place in the binary of victimhood (understood as not having a voice) versus resistance (as claiming voice). In an attempt to challenge the speechlessness-and-agency paradigm, I explore the use of strategic invisibility as an alternative way of claiming agency in a less explicit and performative manner. I focus specifically on how individuals who are categorized under the refugee label can exercise agency through invisibility in the context of the sort of hyper-visibility that is inherently embedded in refugeehood. I want to explore how refugees may chose invisibility to renegotiate their label of refugeehood and to exercise agency. Invisibility can act as a form of resistance, as it is a strategic decision to remain silent or invisible in circumstances that forcibly render individuals (and their voices) visible. Furthermore, individuals may choose to be invisible in some circumstances and be visible in others, based on how the refugee
category may help to access resources in some spaces and create barriers to resources in others.

I argue that the representation of refugee identities, both in the media and in bureaucratic practices, has important implications for refugees’ choices to remain invisible. For instance, refugees might not desire the spaces of hyper-visibility in which refugeehood and practices of claiming voice are often located. In terms of bureaucratic and policy processes in the humanitarian context, I look at how the process of ‘refugee labelling’ per se is monolithic and essentialist. As explored by Roger Zetter (1991), the labelling process essentializes, and it also creates and perpetuates stereotypes – thus rendering the refugee identity one-dimensional and rigid.

Labelling, and rigid refugee identity

In most of our everyday life, as individuals, we are often required to belong to or identify with institutionalized categories – for example, identifying as female or male, as citizen or non-citizen, and so on – and we interact with our surroundings under these categories (Butler, 1993). With each category comes certain forms of subjection or expectation that we are expected to fulfil. In the realms of citizenship and belonging, the refugee identity is a powerful category in its implications for the subjects defined within it.

I am interested in the ways in which the process of labelling impacts on the identity formation of individuals who may not recognize themselves in the pre-established notions of refugeehood, and the ways in which they decide to negotiate the identity placed upon them through various circumstances. In fact, as explored by Zetter (1991) in the context of the humanitarian sector, the process of labelling renders refugees objects of policy discourses and agendas, thus consequently defining or depicting them in ‘convenient images’ (Wood, 1985: 1, quoted in Zetter, 1991: 44). Most importantly, the process of labelling also entails a ‘process of stereotyping which involves disaggregation, standardization, and the formulation of clear cut categories’ (Zetter, 1991: 6). Through this process of labelling and categorizing, two identities are formed: first, that of the benevolent institution (the humanitarian organization in the context of the humanitarian sector) and second, that of the refugee, who is presented in terms of his/her needs from the perspective of institutional services. In the process, the refugee is represented through a single lens, in the form of a number or as data, and is seen in isolation.
from a large part of her/his being (Zetter, 1991: 44, quoting Schaffer, 1977). And yet, such identity formation is a two-way process in which both the institutions and the subjects interact and form. In the case of the refugee, formal institutions such as the state, international organizations and some parts of academia overall formulate the identity of the refugee through the repetition of procedures that appear 'normal, routine, apolitical, conventional' in their programme, but these procedures require the conformity of the refugee subjects to the label in order to access specific services or resources (Zetter, 1991: 46, quoting Batley, 1983).

However, individual refugees also have some space in which to negotiate their various identities, in various circumstances. Unpacking the refugee-labelling process helps us to understand its impact on an individual's process of identity formation in the context of the refugee experience, and how he/she chooses to engage with the institutionalized category. As discussed by Sewite Kebede (2010: 6), identity formation is a ‘social process rather than [an] individual process’, since the way in which an individual perceives her/himself is ‘embedded in society’. As such, how a society relates to refugees, often by perpetuating negative images of either criminality or victimhood, is often internalized – in turn, influencing the ways in which young refugees may perceive themselves.

Furthermore, the issue with institutional labelling, especially refugee labelling, is that it does not keep up with the diverse changes that take place in the process of identity formation. Like many socially constructed identities such as gender, self-formation of identity is a fluid and dynamic process. As individuals, we recreate and reinvent ourselves based on our interaction with society, and our past and new experiences. However, the label of refugee does not allow for fluidity, nor does it allow for the heterogeneity of individuals' identities. As part of new identity formation and new settings, refugees will develop new habits but also may recreate old habits or spaces. For example, the case of Palestinian refugees in Sweden, as narrated by Yousif M. Qasmiyeh (in Qasmiyeh and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013: 137), is particularly striking. Despite their resettlement in new settings in Sweden, in a social-housing neighbourhood, Palestinian refugees from Baddawi camp in Lebanon have recreated 'estate-camps' with former neighbours and school friends from their 'home-camp'. These recreated spaces have enabled them to maintain a sense of belonging to their common identity, their homeland, and to their religious and cultural traditions. In effect, some continue to migrate to their former home-camps to visit family and friends, including to celebrate religious festivities during Ramadan and Eid (Qasmiyeh and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013: 138). As explained by the author, the recreation of old rituals in new spaces by...
these Palestinian refugees defies the ‘pure monolithic understanding of specific places, as if these were static and lacked the energy or the ability to change and evolve’ (Qasmiyeh in ibid.: 138).

The main difference with the recreation of camp spaces across time and space, apart from better facilities and services, is that in the case of resettled Palestinian refugees in Sweden, they were in charge of consciously recreating spaces that are similar to their home-camps (Qasmiyeh and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013). This representation of camps as changing and travelling spaces (ibid.) can also be transferred to refugee identities, ones that change and evolve over time while also re-creating spaces for old habits and traditions. However, the refugee label does not take into consideration the ways in which individuals in that category change; rather, the refugee label ‘freeze[s] groups in time’ (Polzer, 2008: 493). Categories like the refugee label treat groups as static and unchanging through their documented criteria (Polzer, 2008).

Given the above discussion on the presentation of refugees and the lack of nuanced analysis on refugee voices, how do refugees negotiate the stigma and hyper-visibility that the label creates? In the following section, I turn to strategic invisibility, which is deployed by various refugees as a bargaining tool to negotiate the refugee label among the multiple identities of individuals. I contend that strategic invisibility enables refugees to claim ‘normalcy’ in the context of the hyper-visible labelling and the stigmatization that comes with the refugee identity. Strategic invisibility defies the powerlessness/resistance dichotomy, and demonstrates one of the nuanced ways in which refugees negotiate spaces and new identities in response to institutionalized categories.

Strategic invisibility and labelling

In migration and refugee studies, the concept of invisibility is often discussed in the contexts in which refugees are rendered invisible by powerful institutions, states or international organizations. That is, refugees that are rendered intentionally invisible for political purposes due to the failure of states to provide recognition and resources to them (for example, Puggioni, 2005; Harrell Bond and Voutira, 2007). Alternatively, academia focuses on ways in which undocumented migrants adopt invisibility to ‘stay invisible to the “powers that be” by hiding and obscuring identities and activities that the state or other powerful institutions prohibit’ (Polzer and Hammond, 2008: 418). Tara Polzer and Laura Hammond, for instance, discuss invisibility as the relationship between those
with power to see (that is, states or international organizations) and those without power and who cannot be seen, or those avoiding visibility to escape the negative impact of ‘imposed visibility’. In this context, states impose categorization and labels on individuals to render them visible and controlled, and in the process the individuals in question are disempowered – even in cases where they choose invisibility in a context in which they lack legal, political and social protection. In this analysis, it is assumed that refugee groups are most likely to make themselves visible to powerful institutions in order to access resources. However, the analysis overlooks ways in which labelled or categorized refugees can exercise agency by using visibility and invisibility strategically.

Strategic invisibility, as a conscious decision by settled refugees has hardly been explored. In this context, invisibility is a strategic decision that established individuals with refugee experience may undertake to escape labelling by institutions or other individuals. Along the continuum of powerlessness and political voice, settled refugees may choose strategic invisibility to navigate their newly acquired homes and identities. It is an option that enables ‘an act of agency … the first step towards a stronger act of resistance’ (Lollar, 2015: 299). Karen Lollar (2015) proposes two forms of invisibility. The first is in relation to the lack of a comprehensive and inclusive view by those in dominant or powerful positions that includes the absence of viewing the group in question beyond their category or label. The second form of invisibility is one that is strategic: a deliberate response or resistance to the dominant group or to the imposed label. While Lollar (2015) contends that the two forms are not mutually exclusive in the context of refugee identities and labelling, I argue that the second form of invisibility takes place in response to the first form. In many of my encounters with friends and acquaintances, during discussions on the experience of refugeehood, the choice to remain invisible was often made in response to the misrepresentation of their identities through the monolithic lens of refugeehood. Thus, the choice to remain invisible is to ‘avoid the stigma, the danger, and the rejection of the [refugee] system’ (Lollar, 2015: 306). Claiming invisibility as a form of resistance counteracts the often-assumed notion of visibility as the precondition for resistance. As interpreted by Hannah Arendt, resistance or human agency takes place through (wo)men’s ‘propensity to act’, thus visibility as well as sociality and community is the underlying basis for resistance (Gordon, 2002: 135). However, while visibility as a precondition for agency and resistance may apply in some circumstances, in other situations invisibility as a choice in itself can reflect a form of resistance.
Choosing invisibility does not always mean the rejection of the refugee identity. Rather, for some of those who chose invisibility, they may continue to revisit their memories of childhood; their journey to their new homes; and, ultimately, their desire to visit their old neighbourhoods and cities. However, their choices on whether or not to identify with refugeehood are context-specific. Choosing visibility or invisibility is a response to who the ‘spectator’ is. In spaces of intimate friendships, or among their own communities, the discomfort of visibility is not as present as it is in other social spheres. Rather, in my own community, the way in which we engage in conversations with regard to journeys and migratory experiences are often framed in an almost ‘casual’ way. In fact, the narratives of refugeehood are seldom discussed on their own; rather, they are often told as part of wider conversations of migration, diaspora and memories of childhood or home in the country of origin. It is in the intimate spaces of privacy or among friends that refugees dwell on their journeys of refugeehood, while constructing and reforming their new identities. Therefore, within the private sphere the experience of refugeehood will always exist, albeit away from the institutionalized labelling of refugeehood that often leads to hyper-visibility. This is the space in which refugees can make sense of their newly adopted lifestyles, a space in which individuals can go beyond the rigidity of refugeehood, and navigate the fluidity that the refugee experience presents. It is also a space in which individuals can present themselves in the way in which they choose to be seen as whole individuals, whose identities go beyond the rigid walls of refugee labelling but are as fluid as their own imaginations.

In contrast, in other public spaces – or in encounters with non-community members, state and non-state institutions or media and academia – refugees often choose to remain invisible. While on the one hand, in some public spaces visible refugee identity is necessary to access resources or services, in other public spaces visibility can create further marginalization. In spaces in which there are regular social interactions, strategic invisibility is a tool that can help refugees blend in and, most importantly, can enable choice in what and how to present oneself. Strategic invisibility in social spaces may function as a shell, protecting the individual from the judgements and presumptions of spectators. It is a way in which refugees can chose to appear in an identity with which they feel most comfortable: it is not a ‘made up’ identity; rather, it relates to aspects of their being that the refugee label omits.

The notion of strategic invisibility destabilizes the traditional assumption of what refugee resistance should look like. Rather, it pushes us to think of the nuanced and numerous ways in which agency is
exercised by refugees and ways in which refugees navigate established processes of categorization and labelling, as well as demonstrating their resilience in creating their own safe space where they can relive their old experiences and familiarize themselves with their new circumstances.

Final reflections and conclusion

Throughout my engagement in the Becoming Adult project, one of the most persistent questions that I kept facing in my mind was the question of when one ceases to be a refugee (also see Haile et al., this volume). As argued by Kebede (2010), the bureaucratic procedures of refugeehood, from the process of obtaining refugee status to becoming a naturalized citizen, may have a beginning and end. But when does the feeling of longing and loss of belonging end? This has made me question whether having physical stability – that is, being settled in one place – could erase the in-betweens that the refugee experience creates. Despite newly acquired citizenships or naturalization, rarely does the refugee belong to the newly adopted nation. Rather, the refugee often seeks belonging in the memories of the lost home, while building a new home in the adopted state. So, I wonder whether refugeehood is a defined status that has a start and an end, or whether it will always be part of an individual’s identity – one that encompasses old memories, lost homes and newly adopted identities. I am of the belief that the experiences of displacement and loss continue to exist in refugees’ lives. The refugee is the one who seeks new places and memories to belong to, while coming to terms with the loss of the old home.

And yet, when it comes to institutional spaces, when is an individual no longer considered a refugee? Throughout the Becoming Adult theatrical exercise referred to in the introduction, as well as through the various interactions that I had both with my fellow research-assistant colleagues and my external friends, I noticed how the representation of refugeehood also has a performative element. That is, in spaces where there is a conversation about refugeehood, there is the assumption that refugees want to be seen or want sympathy from spectators. There is an expectation of telling and retelling the stories of their journeys or their difficulty in integrating in host states. Sometimes, it almost appears as if the storytelling process is a necessary element in order to be seen as a legitimate refugee. This replicates the institutional storytelling that is required for the bureaucratic process, to establish the legitimacy of the refugee’s story. For instance, on one occasion when my colleagues and
I were speaking about our experiences in the research project to a class of postgraduate students, some individuals felt the need to demand the logistics of or reasons for our journeys in a very intrusive manner.

Thus, in the realms of refugee experiences and social interactions that reiterate the violence of storytelling in establishing the legitimate refugee, strategic invisibility is often a necessary coping mechanism. It is a powerful tool with which to come to terms with the traumatic experiences of refugehood and migration, in one’s own time and spaces. It is an opportunity to humanize oneself, while building a new life and reminiscing on the memories of home.

Notes

1. ‘Becoming Adult’ is a longitudinal research project focused on an understanding of the perception of well-being and the future by unaccompanied minors in the UK. https://becomingadult.net/about-becoming-adult and https://wordpress.com/posts/my/thewellwishers.wordpress.com

2. The team was composed of senior researchers, as well as research assistants with diverse experiences of migration, from a variety of countries.

References


