

The Vietnamese Refugee Crisis of the 1970s and 1980s: A Retrospective View from NGO Resettlement Workers

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Abstract

This article examines the role of NGO resettlement workers in refugee camps in Southeast Asia during the late 1970s and 1980s. The workers offered psychological support to refugees whose lives were in turmoil, but they also helped them present themselves in ways that would be most attractive to Western host countries. This process involves both commission and omission. NGO resettlement workers sometimes actively guided refugees by giving them specific advice and training. At other times, they facilitated this endeavour by observing how refugees fit themselves into the selection categories of various states, but chose to remain silent in order to avoid jeopardizing the refugees' chances for resettlement.

Résumé

Cet article examine le rôle des travailleurs du secteur de réinstallation oeuvrant pour les ONG dans les camps de réfugiés en Asie du Sud-Est pendant la fin des années 70 et les années 80. Les travailleurs ont non seulement fourni des soutiens psychologiques aux réfugiés dont la vie avait été bouleversée, mais ils les ont également aidé à se présenter aux pays d'accueil occidentaux sous des aspects qui seraient les plus favorables à attirer leur intérêt. C'était un processus qui impliquait des parts égales de commission et d'omission. Parfois les travailleurs du secteur de réinstallation oeuvrant pour les ONG ont activement guidé les réfugiés en leur fournissant des conseils et des formations spécifiques, tandis que d'autres fois ils ont choisi de les

aider à atteindre leurs objectifs en observant passivement la façon dont les réfugiés tentaient de se faire conformer aux catégories de sélection de différents pays, afin d'éviter de mettre en péril leurs chances de réinstallation.

The Vietnamese refugee crisis that began with the Fall of Saigon in 1975 and the harsh reality of communist rule,¹ which culminated in the mass exodus of “boat people” beginning in 1978, was a defining moment for the international community and for countries of resettlement. The UNHCR helped to negotiate a unique “orderly departure program”² with the Vietnamese government and organized a number of international conferences in order to manage the crisis,³ and countries like the United States, Australia, and Canada developed new resettlement schemes in response to what was unfolding in the South China Sea. While some refugees returned to Vietnam in the 1990s as part of the Comprehensive Plan of Action negotiated with the Vietnamese government,⁴ before that many others were selected for resettlement by various governments after spending time in refugee camps in Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Indonesia. Over 1.6 million refugees were resettled between 1975 and 1997, mainly in Western countries.⁵

The broad contours of the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees are now well known.⁶ Less well known, however, are the activities of “middle people” in the resettlement process—namely, the many Western volunteers and members of NGOs who staffed the refugee camps that were created for the Vietnamese and who provided comfort and aid to refugees and helped them to relocate to a safe third country. Occupying

positions at what Steven Castles and Mark Miller call the “meso level” of the migration process,⁷ these workers navigated the space between receiving state selection and admission policies and the refugees who were seeking resettlement.

This article focuses on the men and women who worked with Vietnamese refugees in transit camps in Southeast Asia beginning in the late 1970s and their perceptions of how refugees fit themselves into the selection categories of Western states. Data were collected on the basis of oral history interviews with these workers. This article examines how NGO resettlement workers sometimes merely observed the complex ways in which Vietnamese refugees negotiated the process of being accepted for resettlement, and how at other times they acted as direct facilitators in this process. It must be emphasized, however, that even choosing to “observe” rather than act had repercussions. To observe, but to remain silent about some or all of what one sees, is itself a choice. NGO resettlement workers were forced to make these decisions daily, and they realized that action (or inaction) would have profound implications for the future of these refugees.

Theoretical and Conceptual Context

International migration is arguably best understood from a systems perspective.⁸ This perspective emphasizes the interconnections between the macro-level social, political, and economic forces that lead people to leave their countries of origin and state policies that define who should be admitted as an immigrant or refugee, and the micro-level individual and household-level calculus involved with decisions to leave and where to move. It also points to the importance of the “meso-level” third-party intermediaries who facilitate the migration. The latter, described by Castles and Miller as the “migration industry,” includes immigration lawyers and consultants, travel agents, labour recruiters, and people smugglers, as well as the representatives of voluntary agencies and NGOs that help migrants and refugees.⁹

At the macro level, state immigration policies normally contain clear-cut categories defining those it deems admissible and inadmissible. Most countries’ immigration laws also specify particular sets of policies governing the selection and admittance of visitors, students, workers (with or without the right of permanent residence), family members, refugees, and the like.¹⁰ These categories tend to be precisely defined and mutually exclusive. As Bakewell argues,¹¹ policy categories “are used to define those groups of people who are assumed to share particular qualities that make it reasonable to subject them to the same outcomes of policy. The policy will lay out how the organization concerned will interact with people who fall into a particular category; for example granting them legal rights or providing them with resources and services.”¹²

These policies are further codified and made progressively more specific in immigration regulations and field processing manuals and guidelines issued to border control agents who are expected to implement policy. Visa issuance and other border control decisions essentially involve fitting individual cases into the boxes of the “admissible” categories within immigration policy.¹³ In this light, individuals are not, in some ontological sense, inherently “refugees,” “migrant workers,” or “permanent residents,” but rather become so because they are defined as such by states.¹⁴

At the micro level, the real world of immigrants and refugees is not as tidy as policy categories imply.¹⁵ As the literature on transnationalism and diasporas has demonstrated,¹⁶ it is actually quite rare for individuals to completely cut their ties and relationships with their home countries, and they often move back and forth between their countries of origin and settlement. This calls into question the seemingly hard and fast distinction between “sending” and “receiving” countries. Moreover, individuals and households often have mixed motives for migration, and it can be difficult to ascertain whether individuals and households move for “economic” or “political” reasons. Though some countries like Canada now recognize “dual intent,” insofar as they recognize that an individual may seek temporary admission but also have the longer-term goal of settling permanently, individual visa applicants are assessed on the basis of the rules governing the application category under which they are applying.

As Turton argues in his discussion of how “forced migration” is conceptualized, the distinction between “forced” and “unforced” migration is inherently problematic:¹⁷ “By trying to separate out the categories of migrants along a continuum of choice—free at one end and entirely closed at the other— . . . [various conceptualization] schemes are in danger of ignoring the most important quality of all migrants and indeed of all human beings: their agency.”¹⁸

Turton is careful, however, to not completely dismiss the utility of the category of “forced migrant.” Instead, he pleads for a better understanding of the point of view of refugees, or “forced migrants,” their inherent humanity as “purposive actors,” and “their active decision making: how they reach the decision to leave, what information is available to them when they make the decision; the way in which their journey is financed, the degree to which it is planned with a specific destination in mind; the extent to which they had prior contact with that country, etc. etc.”¹⁹

Thus, if state border-control decisions involve fitting individual cases into immigration categories, individual migrants and refugees, through their agency, also try to fit themselves into the categories they believe the state is looking for by virtue of its immigration categories. As such, all

migrants—whether they apply as students, temporary workers, family members, permanent residents, or refugees—are “purpose actors”²⁰ who craft their biographies in ways that they believe will maximize their chances of being selected by the country in which they wish to settle. In so doing, they may selectively emphasize, de-emphasize, embellish, and modify aspects of their biographies, identities, and situations that they believe would favourably impress the country of their choice. Of course, the process of biography formation, or what Goffman called the “presentation of self in everyday life,”²¹ can cross into misrepresentation and fraud where claimed identities, experiences, relationships, and attributes have little or no basis in reality.

In this context, third parties at the meso level also play a key role in this collaborative process of biography formation and categorization. Immigration lawyers and consultants sell advice to clients about how to best craft their biographies to meet their immigration-related objectives. People smugglers take advantage of individuals who are desperate to leave their countries of origin but who face difficulties in meeting a receiving country’s rules for legal entry. In both cases, the expectation of financial gain helps to explain the activities and interests of these third parties. However, while NGO resettlement workers and volunteers who work with migrants and refugees are not necessarily motivated by the prospect of financial gain, they are often part of the informal processes that contribute to the system of biography categorization at both the state and individual level.

Individuals who work for the UNHCR are often called upon to initially screen refugee claimants and confirm aspects of their biography that make them eligible for their formal categorization as a refugee under the Convention definition of a refugee or protected person.²² Those who work for other NGOs may provide informal advice to individuals about what states are looking for, or what aspects of their biography they ought to emphasize. Some may simply observe how refugees craft their biographies, yet others may participate in subtle yet important ways such as by staying silent when they observe refugees crafting biographies to meet state-defined selection criteria.

Data Collection

Our data were collected through one-on-one interviews and questionnaires administered to 14 individuals who worked in different refugee camps in Southeast Asia in the 1970s and 1980s. We located these former resettlement workers through social media sites (e.g., “Galang Camp” and “Galang Refugee Camp” Facebook groups) and through chain referral. Our participants included ten male and four female workers in several international and non-profit organizations, including the International Catholic

Migration Commission (ICMC), Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Save the Children Fund (SCF), the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), and World Relief (WR). Their work in refugee camps involved advising refugees, administering health-care services, conducting basic screening, and providing educational training and cultural orientation to local volunteers. These local teachers in turn taught classes to refugees. Aside from these more obvious tasks, resettlement workers provided much-needed emotional support and encouragement, which was especially important for those who suffered from the disappointment of being rejected for resettlement.

Our interviewees now live in Indonesia, Uganda, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Many participants are now in their 60s, with a few in their 50s and 70s. A number of them continue to be involved in some capacity with refugees and underprivileged or marginalized populations in their own country or internationally.²³ Our respondents included both Westerners and non-Westerners. The interviewees are not of Vietnamese origin, but several of them speak the language fluently and thus were better able to understand the “lived experience” of the refugees they assisted.

Some of the interviews were conducted over the Internet and lasted between one and one-half to two hours. Several participants opted to give their answers in writing, and the completed responses were then sent back to us through email. We asked about the nature of their role as facilitators, their perception of the refugee situation, and the bureaucratic process of selection and resettlement of different Western countries. Their accounts of their experiences as resettlement workers were invaluable to us insofar as they gave us a window into how Vietnamese refugees negotiated the transition from camp life to resettlement abroad. It is important to note that our intention in this article is not to have resettlement workers “speak for” Vietnamese refugees. Rather, we are interested in understanding the experiences of resettlement workers and their interactions with Vietnamese refugees. As has been indicated, these interactions ranged from more active roles in helping refugees craft their biographies and personae, to more subtle interventions, sometimes involved simply remaining silent.

These workers are uniquely qualified to offer insights into this period in history, because they *can* speak about it with relative freedom. However, even 40 years after their resettlement, some refugees may be reluctant to talk about how they fit themselves into state-defined refugee selection categories lest they be accused of having deliberately misrepresented themselves and their situations to gain entry. In this way, the workers we have interviewed give their voices to those who cannot speak.

These oral histories should, however, be treated with caution. As Abrams and Hamilton and Shopes argue,²⁴ there is a distinction within oral history research between the collection of “facts” about the past and the collection of “memories” about the past. Oral history tells us as much about what happened in the past as it does about how individuals remember the past, or as Abrams puts it, the ways in which “people articulate subjective experiences about the past through the prism of the present.”²⁵ For many of our interviewees, the time spent in transit camps remains one of their most important and meaningful life experiences. As George noted when asked about how this work has affected him, “It’s a defining experience in my life and I’m very grateful for it. It’s made me a better person—giving me a greater appreciation for a life experience that I probably would never have had. It’s made my life much richer, much more interesting, so I’m very grateful for that experience.”

George’s remarks emphasize his evolution as a person, which he feels would not have been possible in any other context. Once again, it is important for researchers to be aware that personal narratives cannot always yield results that meet the highest standards of reliability and verifiability, especially when such accounts are retrospective. This is even more likely to be the case when respondents’ self-concepts are closely connected to their roles as resettlement workers. Therefore, they may be inclined to focus on situations that allow them to offer aid and comfort to refugees, and even help them to subvert the rules, rather than on situations in which they acted as informal gatekeepers for Western countries. This of course is a much less sympathetic role. All of these limitations must be taken into account, but nevertheless these narratives are immensely valuable in their own terms.

Resettlement Workers and the Crafting of Biography

The academic literature on life in refugee transit camps often focuses on the psychological stresses and strains of living in camps and waiting for resettlement. One view tends to paint a picture of refugees in transit camps as lacking human agency,²⁶ and as largely passive in the face of processes over which they have no control. Descriptions of camp life for Vietnamese refugees emphasize boredom, uncertainty, and feelings of helplessness among refugees in transit camps.²⁷ Referring specifically to the Vietnamese in refugee camps in the 1970s, Kelly argued, “The Vietnamese role was passive: things were done to them; they did very little. And, like much of camp life that followed, they stood in interminable lines waiting for something to happen.”²⁸

In another study of camp life for Vietnamese refugees in the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Japan, Knudsen describes

life as “meaningless, uncertain, waste of time, boring and passivizing.”²⁹ This picture of camp life for Vietnamese refugees is further reinforced by Chan and Loveridge’s research on Kai Tak camp near Hong Kong in the late 1970s.³⁰ Though they point out that there are significant differences in various camps based on context, they argue that in Kai Tak camp, the Vietnamese experienced intense culture shock, because the camp was located so close to the developed, teeming metropolis of Hong Kong. In addition to culture shock, they assert that feelings of helplessness and passivity were the defining features that characterized camp life at that time. As they explain, the refugee is

thus reduced to impotence, either by having no control over what is done to him in the name of institutional efficiency, or for him under the banner of charity. In either case, the refugee is involved more as a spectator than an autonomous individual, a precise parallel in psychological terms of the powerlessness so many experienced being washed around at sea on the journey from Vietnam. The only real difference is that being “at sea” is now metaphorical rather than literal. While there clearly exist many understandable reasons for the all-pervading depression, there would seem a case for Seligman’s (1975) notion of learned helplessness where there is no relationship between the efforts of the person to receive reinforcement and the outcomes of those efforts.³¹

This view of refugee camp life at the time, which may have been tainted by older colonial-inspired stereotypes of the Vietnamese as passive, stoic, and “incapable . . . of sustained thought or action,”³² stands in rather stark contrast to the view of camp life painted by those who analyze the experiences of European displaced persons during and after the Second World War.³³ It requires revision insofar as the NGO resettlement workers with whom we spoke emphasized the ways in which the refugees they observed, and with whom they interacted, consciously crafted their biographies to meet the selection criteria used by national immigration officials, made creative use of informal social networks and transnational ties to develop migration strategies that reflected their own and their family members’ long-term resettlement goals.

Upon their arrival in the country of first asylum in the region, many refugees lacked proper documentation to help establish their background and personal identity. This was not uncommon as a result of the chaotic and dangerous circumstances involved in their exit from Vietnam. However, this presented a major challenge for both the authorities and the refugees themselves when a complex system of paperwork was put in place to select refugees for resettlement to one of the safe third countries. Refugees thus faced the daunting task of having to reconstruct their personal histories in ways that sounded credible and convincing to

authorities (i.e., immigration officials) who were, in effect, in charge of their fate. Conversely, immigration authorities had to sort through issues of credibility in order to assess whether the person admitted fit into their predefined selection criteria. Mike remembered the broad contours of the process as “like a lottery of arbitrary justice within a massive labyrinth of deception.”

Our interviews with resettlement workers revealed that refugees were adept at exercising at least some control over their destiny. Workers perceived that refugees used a number of strategies to make themselves appear more attractive to the country they hoped would accept them. This, of course, depended to a great extent on how a given country categorized different types of refugees. Generally, the most important criterion for acceptance by different countries, particularly the United States (which was also the first choice for many of the refugees),³⁴ was immediate family reunification. This meant that in order for refugees to be accepted for resettlement quickly, they needed to show that they had other family members who were already living in the United States. Unaccompanied minors represented the second category. This included children under 18 who were in the camps alone. The third category included former South Vietnamese military personnel as well as those who worked for the US government during the war. Those with distant relatives in the United States were considered next. Lastly, refugees without any connection to the United States, but who had been rejected by at least two other countries, were also considered for resettlement.³⁵

Canada’s policies were similar to those of the United States—that is, Canada also considered family reunification as a priority, although our respondents indicated that Canadian authorities placed more emphasis on age, English language acquisition, health, and the ability of the refugees to be integrated into the workplace.³⁶ In other words, in order to be accepted by Canada, it was particularly important that refugees could demonstrate their employability. As Mike put it, “The Canadians took the best English speakers . . . it was generally perceived that Canada accepted the ‘cream of the crop’ of the refugees who did not have family connection abroad.”

Canada developed its own innovative private sponsorship program to help with the refugee crisis.³⁷ The program was formally introduced in 1979 and involved the application of a “matching formula”—that is “the government would sponsor one refugee for each one sponsored privately.”³⁸ In other words, church groups or groups of five or more adult Canadians would be allowed to sponsor a refugee or a refugee family directly. This sponsorship involved providing resettlement assistance and support to refugees for their first year in Canada.³⁹

Australia, while also focused on nuclear family relations, accepted young families as well as well as (often) unaccompanied women.⁴⁰ Despite these clearly articulated selection criteria, one of our interviewees’ main memories of the Australian selection system was that it was informally shaped by gendered understandings of resettlement. Some reported that being a single young female was considered an asset. “The Australians had a reputation for accepting young single women,” recalled Doug. “I heard it expressed that the women would either find a mate or a job rather easily in Australia, so they would not put a strain on local resources.” Mike’s recollection was that “Australia accepted the most attractive women.” As previously noted, oral history data can be problematic because it is difficult to verify whether respondents are drawing conclusions based on fact or their perceptions and memories of the situation.

However, the work of James Coughlan and Adrian Carton lends support to the assertions of the above-mentioned respondents.⁴¹ As Coughlan notes, “For a short period during 1978–1979 some Australian immigration officers working in Malaysia deliberately split families in order to select young single females for entry to Australia.”⁴² Carton observes that because females immigrants are considered to be non-threatening, they help to defuse the moral panic that is often associated with refugee crises.⁴³

Other smaller, European countries, especially those that make up the Scandinavian Peninsula,⁴⁴ and New Zealand⁴⁵ accepted smaller numbers of refugees. Some, like Denmark, did not have a clear system of selection criteria. Instead, their policies were more often based on the “need to fill quota” basis.⁴⁶ Although these countries accepted very few refugees, they often took the more difficult cases, such as individuals with serious illnesses or disabilities, victims of sexual assaults, unaccompanied minors with no family connection, as well as the elderly with no family.⁴⁷

The brief discussion above of immigration policies in various countries and the constraints that these policies impose on refugees highlights the need for refugees to craft their biography and identity in ways that help them meet these criteria. The framing and reframing of one’s past life often might involve the creation of strategic family connections where no such connections actually exist. This of course requires great ingenuity and creativity, but as we will see, it can also lead to unintended and unanticipated consequences.

George, one of our respondents, was an American worker in a refugee camp in Thailand who later married a Cambodian woman. He shared a story that spoke to the need for family connections to meet American selection criteria. He explained that his wife’s family had a male friend in California. This man had lost his wife in the genocide, and coincidentally, his wife’s mother had also lost her husband:

What they tried to do was to show that this man was the husband of my wife's mother. So they basically made up the story. They somehow convinced the officer that this was a true story, even though it wasn't. My wife's mother and sister were accepted by the us agency to reunify with the man who'd already been accepted for resettlement. So there were a lot of these stories, dealing with establishing family reunification—that someone they knew who had already been resettled was a family member. The interviewers gave priority to those families rather than somebody who had nobody in the us.

The attempt to construct family connections also involved changing names. As Daniel said, "Some [refugees] intentionally falsified names and documents in the hope of getting accepted by a certain country because 'the new names' had relatives in that country." NGO resettlement workers also saw that changing one's age was another common practice for the refugees, because, according to Emmy, "the older the refugees were, the more problems they faced in being accepted by different countries." Another example of reframing biographies was offered by Michael, who spoke of what he remembered as the "strange" case of a "brother and sister."

There was a young man and woman. They had already been accepted to leave for the us. So I was interviewing them, not for their admission interview, but the resettlement interview. There were two interviews: one to see if they qualify, then after they were accepted, we do a second interview for resettlement placement. So we know they were already going to go to the us, but we had to prepare their bio (language, education, etc.) to place them somewhere. And so there's this brother and sister, and she was pregnant, and they appeared to be unusually close, like she was almost leaning on him.

It soon became evident that they were not brother and sister, but in fact, girlfriend and boyfriend. However, this couple was afraid to admit that they had misrepresented themselves, for fear of invalidating their application for resettlement. And as Michael was aware, there is a huge difference between what one knows (or suspects) and what can be proven:

We were trying to figure out where's the father of the child—it always became a little fuzzy. At one point, they said she was raped by pirates—so tragic. It turned out they're boyfriend and girlfriend: they weren't married, and he got her pregnant, and he lied to say that he's her brother, because he was afraid they'd be separated—she may go to one country and he may go to another. And we said, why didn't you just tell the truth, and they said they were afraid. At that point it didn't matter—they were already accepted

and we just tried to place them, but they were so afraid that we would separate them.

Establishing family connections is especially important in successful relocation. However, this effort is complicated by important differences in Eastern and Western cultures,⁴⁸ which may have legal ramifications. Michael told of a situation of "a man and two women with ten children" he remembered dealing with where they steadfastly adhered to a story, in spite of its obvious inconsistencies, because they were aware of potential legal problems in the West:

The children all looked alike and were very similar in age. In fact, some of the kids looked like they were the same age as each other. They claimed that a man and *one* woman had all of these children, and the other woman was a sister of the wife with no husband, and living with them. And no matter what, they wouldn't change their story. I had no way to prove it, but I believe that he had children by both women. It was a polygamous affair, which was not uncommon in Vietnam, especially for older people. But they knew that if they admitted to polygamy, they'd be rejected by the us, because that's against the law. And so no matter what, they wouldn't change their story.

Thus, as we can see, part of the legacy of the war is the hiding of identity. One's second wife is transformed into one's sister-in-law, and one's lover is reconfigured as a brother. The transformation of one's biography and family relationships is imperative if one is to meet the most important aspect of the selection criteria—family reunification. Michael, the resettlement worker who described the situation outlined above, was aware that the account offered was probably untrue, but decided not to make an issue of it since to do so would jeopardize the family's chances of being accepted. As has been noted, to choose to do nothing or say nothing is also a form of facilitation. In this case, Michael chose not to act because of his knowledge of structural requirements in Western countries might place their resettlement in jeopardy.

Informal Social Networks

Another strategy designed to enhance one's chances of survival involves the exchange of information through informal networks—in particular with those who have already been screened by officials. Gaylord talked about the resourcefulness of the refugees: "There were daily rumours (in Galang) about the moods of the interviewers, which interviewer to avoid on a certain day, even which clothing colour seemed to be getting the most acceptances. They also knew ways of getting rejected by countries they did not wish to go to (like Canada, because it was considered too cold)."

Gaylord's story shows how refugees were not passive in the interview process. In fact, they would sometimes exercise agency by rejecting an offer to resettle in a particular country rather than the reverse. Through the sharing of information, they knew that if they could not settle (for whatever reason) in two countries to which they had applied, they would then become eligible for admission to the us. For some refugees then, the question became "How can I make sure that I will not be able to resettle in country A or country B?" Sometimes a vehement "No!" would suffice when, at the end of the interview, the refugee would be asked, "Would you like to go to Canada?"

Thus, being "aware" was very important, and one's level of awareness increased the longer one stayed in refugee camps. Michael, whose job was to "pre-screen" refugees for their interviews with us immigration observed, "A lot of the strategies that people used to make themselves more acceptable was awareness, which, over time, when you spent more time in the camp and you tried and you failed, you become more aware of which country had which criteria and you tried to meet them."

As can be expected, information shared among refugees in the camps was primarily about the selection process of different Western delegations. Doug shared with us his recollection of refugees in both Malaysia and Indonesia—two of the refugee camps in the region in which he worked throughout the 1980s:

Rumours fuelled the camp. If someone was accepted or refused by a delegation, everyone wanted to know what questions were asked and how they were answered. I think all the refugees denied ever cooperating with or having anything to do with the communist government. There were lists of questions and answers that they passed among themselves, very often memorized in order. The delegations were aware of this and would occasionally ask questions out of order to trip up refugees. We really just focused on teaching them English and preparing them for when they would go on to whichever country accepted them.

As Doug's account shows, the officials of various NGOs who helped to select refugees for resettlement were not unaware of the refugees' efforts to make themselves appear to "fit" into the categories that made them eligible for resettlement. Though they no doubt recognized that virtually all of those who were living in the camp were genuine refugees, they nonetheless had to balance their own emotions over the trauma individuals experienced with the need to maintain the integrity of their respective selection system. As a result, they had to continue to revise their selection strategies in order to stay ahead of the refugees' efforts to exercise agency.

As previously mentioned, having military connections to the former South Vietnamese Army increased one's chances of successful relocation in the us. But how could this be established when often people had no documents? We have seen, quite understandably, that refugees were perceived by resettlement workers as having few qualms about the creation of a fictitious world. Michael describes how this was done:

Some had documents, but a lot didn't. We had to interview them to build their profiles. The story was plausible that they might have been in the army. A lot could tell you where they were, what their unit was. You could tell they were military people by the way they talked, the way they held themselves—their stories were very authentic. But then there were the grey areas. Of course people began to tell each other. How did the interview go? What did they ask?

Michael further explains that the exchange of information began to take on a structured and systematic form: "We found that at one point, they were having classes in the barracks, how to pass the test. They learned what kind of questions. So, how many bullets in an MC 16, or what's the name of the basic training camps, or who is the commander of the 25th Division. And so we began to find out when you interviewed people, they were all giving the same story . . . people are going to do what they feel they have to do."

Organization and control of information is by definition one of the strongest forms of exercising one's agency. The dissemination of such information to those in one's cohort, even in these difficult circumstances, demonstrates a refusal to be defeated by events. We have already seen that even rejection may involve a careful consideration of available knowledge.

Transnational Exchanges

To achieve their resettlement objective, NGO resettlement workers also observed that refugees also relied on transnational exchanges. Transnational connections are often understood as part of a process in which individuals form multiple social, economic, and cultural relations between their country of origin and country of resettlement (as well as other countries).⁴⁹ However, for the Vietnamese refugees, these connections began much earlier. As soon as the refugees arrived in the camp, they would be sure to communicate (by letter) with family members. They would ask their advice about the various government immigration policies and programs, the resettlement process in general, and family members' prior experiences with camp life. These letters would also serve to demonstrate that the refugee had family connections in a safe third country, which would presumably aid in family reunification. Thus, the advice

that refugees received from overseas also played a role in their overall strategies of getting accepted by a country in which they were most interested in resettling.

Vera, who worked as an English teacher in Galang Refugee Camp in Indonesia from 1986 to 1996, noted that refugees put effort into “making a good record in the camp by working, volunteering, studying, not getting involved in vices, etc.” Daniel, a former English teacher, explained that keeping themselves active “was regarded by delegations as persons who wanted self-improvement in their lives,” which of course enhanced their chances of being accepted for resettlement.

Michael describes how the country-to-country exchange of information could even change the dynamics of relocation. As has been mentioned, many of the refugees chose the United States as their top country of resettlement. They were thus willing to spend the time waiting to be accepted. Refugee workers, on the other hand, found this frustrating because, in their view, the goal should be for refugees to get out of the camp as quickly as possible.

We tried to tell the refugees, “Look, you don’t meet the criteria—go apply to Canada.” A Canadian just told me they’re frustrated because they can’t fill their quota. The Australians were frustrated because they were trying to be generous and the refugees go “I don’t want to go to your country. Please reject me, because I know that the Americans were willing to consider me if I were rejected twice.”

But then I would have this complication with the refugees and I’d say, “Look, don’t do that. You’re just going to delay your departure. Go! Your objective should be to get out of here. Everybody is going somewhere—just go! Canada is a nice country. Australia is a nice country.”

“Oh, no, no, no, Canada is too cold, and I don’t know anybody in Australia.” Or they would say, “I don’t want to go to Germany because they don’t speak English.”

“Oh, ok, well, you don’t speak English either.”

“Yes, but I want to go to America.”

However, once refugees began to hear stories from family abroad, they began to change their mind. Family connections began to emerge in countries other than the United States. Michael continues,

Another thing is once people began to hear stories from relatives and friends in Western countries (other than the us), the whole equation changed. People started to sign up for Canada. They had a friend there. They had a brother there. They heard it’s not so bad. They had socialized medicine, but in America, no. So once the word got back at least it’s not so bad in Canada, then people didn’t mind going there.

There were people in Norway who got picked up by the freighters and the word got back that things were pretty good in Norway, because they’re a welfare state.

Following such advice, however, does not always result in the desired outcome. Michael recalled the situation of a young man he met in the United States many years after resettlement. This individual tried for many years to sponsor his parents, but he was unable to do so because he had created a new identity during his time in the refugee camp. He had given himself a new identity in order to appear to be a member of another family. As a result of this reconfigured identity, he and his biological family had to suffer the consequences—they could never be reunited.

This course of action may have seemed rational at the time, but as Mike put it, it is not always a good idea to follow the advice of others: “I would advise them to follow the guidelines set by UNHCR and the resettlement countries and ignore the bad advice some refugees received from their relatives overseas. Just answer some questions accurately and truthfully.”

This is not to say that all refugees embraced advice uncritically. For example, one young man who had received a copy of the US immigration guideline (now outdated) noticed that communists and homosexuals were barred from entering the United States. Of course the part about communists would be clear to him, but he did not understand the meaning of the word *homosexual*. He asked a resettlement worker about it and was told it didn’t apply to him and not to worry.

The response from our interviewee above indicates how NGO resettlement workers choose to exercise their own judgment in certain cases. Our data demonstrate that this is true in a variety of situations, especially those that might jeopardize the refugees’ chances of resettlement. On several occasions, resettlement workers had to deal with the issue of “unaccompanied minors,” who may have been disguising their real ages in order to avoid conscription.⁵⁰ One respondent explained, “We had a lot of young men fleeing for that reason. So why wouldn’t they lie and say I’m 17 instead of I’m 20. I saw a lot of that—so do we blame them? At the same time, we had our own criteria. We don’t have criteria for young men fleeing conscription—that’s not in the book. We had criteria for unaccompanied minors to make sure that children get out of refugee camps.”

As this respondent has indicated, resettlement workers did not always go by the book, and “the book” does not necessarily include instructions on dealing with real-life situations. They must constantly deal with ambiguity, and this forces them to exercise their own judgment.

Cheryl, who had been a nurse in the Galang refugee camp in Indonesia, explained how she often had to balance

humanitarian concerns with the need to at least appear to be following prescribed rules:

For refugees with mental illnesses, I organized evaluations by a psychiatrist who was based in Bangkok and came periodically to Galang. He would bring medication that was not allowed by the camp authorities and leave it with me so I could administer it to the refugees. Once they were stabilized, I would organize a repeat evaluation by the psychiatrist so that the refugees could apply for migration to various countries. On a couple of occasions, we—the psychiatrist and I—asserted that refugees who had serious mental illness were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or post-partum depression, both of which did not preclude migration to many countries—in order to allow them the chance to apply for migration.

Thus, these NGO resettlement workers became adept at navigating difficult situations, and facilitated refugee efforts to meet state-defined selection criteria. Their role as meso-level facilitators, as the data indicate, involved much more than applying rules and offering specific information. It involved evaluation, interpretation, and decision-making on a subtle and nuanced level.

Conclusion

From the state's point of view, immigrant and refugee selection involves "marrying" general immigration rules and criteria to individual cases. Immigration officials, including those charged with initially screening and then selecting refugees for resettlement, must apply those rules and "fit" them to real-world cases. From the perspective of refugees, the policy categories and preferences of different countries become the targets they must hit in order to resettle. Refugees must in turn craft their biographies and present the situation of themselves and their family members in particular ways in order to meet the selection criteria of a particular state.

NGO resettlement workers play intermediary roles between the macro and micro levels of the migration process insofar as they variously observe, help, or hinder how refugees negotiate the bureaucratic selection process within refugee camps. In our case, some formally and informally helped refugees try to "fit" their biographies to the selection criteria of the country in which they were seeking resettlement. Others observed what was going on and stayed silent, even when they thought or suspected that the refugees they were in contact with were deliberately presenting themselves in ways that did not reflect the reality of their family or other circumstances. The fact that they stayed silent when they could have whispered their observations to local immigration authorities, or even write formal reports on

what they were observing, arguably reflects their broader understanding of the challenges refugees faced in meeting policy criteria. Of course, it is also possible that some NGO resettlement workers did in fact inform immigration officials in specific countries of what they were observing in the camps and how refugees were crafting stories to make them acceptable. Some of our respondents may in fact have done this, but it is easy to see how, in retrospect, they might not want to emphasize their role in obstructing the resettlement of refugees decades earlier.

Today, much of the public and political discussion focuses on "bogus" refugees: economic migrants who deliberately manipulate internationally recognized refugee protection norms to bypass immigrant selection systems.⁵¹ Though the NGO resettlement workers we interviewed recounted stories of embellishment, telling untruths, and the crafting of biographies or relationships, this does not alter the fact that the people with whom they were working were genuine refugees. Crafting biographies and using social networks and transnational ties to gather information about what different countries were "looking for" are normal parts of the migration process.⁵² They also reflect the agency that refugees possess, even in highly stressful and constraining circumstances, when meeting a bureaucratic category can mean the difference between a bright or bleak future. Data in this article should not, therefore, be interpreted as evidence that Vietnamese were not genuine refugees or in need of resettlement, or that there was something inherently manipulative about their strategies to find a suitable country for resettlement.

While the "rational" decision-making of refugees may seem irrational to others, we suggest that, when examining the situation of refugees, aspects of culture and personal history should be taken into consideration. The ordeal that Vietnamese refugees went through—from wartime experiences to planning their escape to making it in transit camps—illustrates that telling the truth may very well result in tragedy. Ultimately then, the aim is to survive and to prosper, for oneself and for one's family.

Though refugee camps are sites of profound despair and suffering—and places where those who await resettlement are buffeted by processes beyond their control—this does not mean that refugees are completely powerless in these circumstances. The picture of Vietnamese refugee camp life that has been painted in some of the literature needs to be modified through better understanding of refugees' limited forms of agency. Though they do not control the selection criteria of various countries, and are subject to policies and decisions within camps that are beyond their control, they do have some ability to try to achieve settlement outcomes that are most desirable from their point of view.

NOTES

- 1 The communist takeover of Vietnam meant that anyone with connections to the ancien régime or to the Americans faced oppression and persecution. This political backlash necessitated a mass exodus of the “boat people” who risked their lives at sea in search of freedom and a better life for themselves and their family in the West.
- 2 This program was created to allow for the immigration of Vietnamese to the United States and other countries. The aim was to help put an end to the human tragedy by providing a safe and legal alternative for the Vietnamese to leave their homeland.
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- 6 W. Courtland Robinson, *Terms of Refugee: The Indochinese Exodus and the International Response* (London: Zed Books, 1998).
- 7 Stephen Castles and Mark Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Western World*, 3rd ed. (London: Guilford, 2003).
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- 9 Castles and Miller, *Age of Migration*.
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- 13 Vic Satzewich, *Points of Entry: How Canada’s Immigration Officers Decide Who Get In* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015).
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- 16 Robin Cohen, *Global Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 2008); William Safran, “Diaspora in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (1991): 83–99; Luin Goldring and Sailaja Krishnamurti, *Organizing the Transnational: Labour, Politics, and Social Change* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007).
- 17 David Turton, “Conceptualising Forced Migration” (presentation, Refugee Studies Center’s International Summer School in Forced Migration, University of Oxford, July 2003).
- 18 *Ibid.*, 9–10.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959).
- 22 For more on this, please consult UNHCR, Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, <http://www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/3b66c2aa10.pdf>.
- 23 We were saddened to learn of the death of one of the respondents. This individual has been integral to the success of our project, because without his help, we would not have been able to contact our other respondents. His eagerness to share his experiences with us has greatly enriched our research, and we will always be grateful.
- 24 Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010); Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes, “Introduction: Building Partnerships between Oral History and Memory Studies,” in *Oral History and Public Memories*, ed. Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes, vii–xvii (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).
- 25 Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 7.
- 26 Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, “What Is Agency,” *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 4 (1998): 962–1023.
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- 28 Gail Paradise Kelly, *From Vietnam to America: A Chronicle of the Vietnamese Immigration to the United States* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1977), 81.
- 29 John Christian Knudsen, “Boat People in Transit: Vietnamese in Refugee Camps in the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Japan,” *Bergen Occasional Papers in Social Anthropology* 31 (1983): 170.
- 30 Chan and Loveridge, “Refugees ‘in Transit.’”
- 31 *Ibid.*, 754.
- 32 Karl Ashoka Britto, *Disorientation: France, Vietnam, and the Ambivalence of Interculturality* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 94.
- 33 Wsevolod Isajiw, Yuri Boshyk, and Roman Senkus, *The Refugee Experience: Ukrainian Displaced Persons after World War II* (Edmonton, AB: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1992).
- 34 The preference for going to America has its origin in the Vietnamese language. As a result of the outcome of the mass evacuation at the end of the war and the subsequent resettlement of those evacuees in America, the term *ũi Mỹ* (going to America) evolved to signify *ũi vượt biên* (to escape). Thus, escaping generally means going to America.

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- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Freda Hawkins, *Critical Years in Immigration: Canada and Australia Compared* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989).
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- 41 Coughlan, "International Factors."
- 42 Ibid., 15.
- 43 Carton, "Symbolic Crossing," 64–5.
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- 46 See Jfnsson and Petersen, "Denmark," 112.
- 47 Adelman, "Indochinese Refugees in Sweden," 10.
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