

The necessity of de-centering the obvious to include the other

This essay is based on decades of research I conducted on the conditions of refugees in the Netherlands, yet I believe that it can provide insights that go beyond the limits of the Dutch context. In this piece, I elaborate on the importance of distinguishing two phases in the lives of refugees and show how each phase has its own challenges requiring particular forms of assistance and sensitivity.

Like any other group, refugees are heterogeneous in terms of background, skills, talents, and other aspects. What they share is the fact that they have been forced to migrate. Most have had experiences of violence and trauma in their country of origin. Many leave their homes and loved ones without knowing if they will ever see either again. This often results in a feeling of guilt. For refugees, the new country offers a fresh opportunity to live in peace, with an internalized demand to make something of their lives in order to show themselves and others that they have not gone through so much pain for nothing.

The urge to make something of their lives in their new countries is even greater for refugees than for other migrants. It helps to assuage feelings of guilt. Refugees feel compelled to create a meaningful life as a positive contrast to their loss and painful memories of the past. Success also gives them a platform to tell their own stories and those of people they left behind. Through this, a new connection is made to the past that is by recognition and solidarity, rather than by loss. This is one of the important ways many overcome the severity of their pasts.

From several research projects based on the narratives of refugees, we know that in the first phase of their stay in new countries two points are crucial in terms of their long term well-being:

1) First contacts and opportunities:

People who reach a safe haven after an often traumatic journey want to make a new start right away, allowing them to invest in their present and future rather than remain prisoners of the past. It is disastrous for refugees to be held in refugee centers without the possibility to work towards a new future for themselves. This keeps them imprisoned in the past and forces many into a downward spiral that is hard to reverse (this was the case for the Dutch asylum procedure prior to 2015, see Ghorashi 2005, Larruina & Ghorashi 2016, Ghorashi et al. 2018). Conversely, it is also quite damaging to rush refugees into the labor market (read forcing them to do accept any kind of work) without thoughtful consideration of their past qualifications, life/work balance, and long term career opportunities (which is the case in the recent policies in the Dutch context).

2) Refugees are potential entrepreneurs and survivors:

Most refugees need minimal facilities in order to cope. In early stages, they need access to practical information and contacts with relevant parties so that they can slowly and surely find their way in their new society. Policies and assistance should target real needs and meet them in a bespoke fashion. In practice, this requires patient listening skills to be able to identify the refugee's needs and their hidden talents.

Just imagine what happens when you get a new opportunity to live; what kind of energy comes loose. Imagine a coil compressed for years, which in exile springs loose. That is

exactly what happens to many refugees. In their first years, most are coils springing forth, full of energy, eager to prove that they did not leave their countries for nothing. They have energy, motivation, and ideals. This combination has the potential to move mountains. Soon they face many difficulties becoming acquainted with complex bureaucracies of the new countries of their settlement. This is especially true in strong welfare states – such as the Netherlands – which are considered to be flat and accessible to all, yet are quite layered and complex in practice. To really succeed demands an insider's knowledge.

The role of education (in the broad sense of the word) is quite crucial in the first years of arrival of refugees. This can translate to language study combined with professional training and becoming part of various forms of learning structures (academic, vocational or on-job learning). In this context these three aspects are optimal:

- 1) A respectful environment around refugees with people who are interested in their stories and have the patience to engage with those stories even with the barrier of language.
- 2) The possibility for refugees to develop themselves intellectually or professionally in order to take distance from the harsh reality of the moment and the painful memories of the past for a while.
- 3) Sharing pleasant stories, investing in self-development, and engaging in meaningful and quality conversations and contacts are quite important in regaining confidence and creating a new social circle.

Educational institutions could take a very important facilitating role in this phase, in terms of access and acceptance and inclusion.

Personal story

When I arrived in the Netherlands in the late eighties as a refugee from Iran, I found myself in a very uncertain situation. I didn't know if I would gain permission to stay, and I was far away from all that I knew and loved. But I also gained new opportunities in life. That realization felt like an enormous boost of energy, like I was provided a second chance to live and make new choices. I felt indeed like a coiled spring that had been compressed for ages and suddenly, in the Netherlands, had been set free, releasing all its vitality and curiosity. At once I set out to learn Dutch, and a year after my arrival in the country, much to my own amazement, I enrolled in a cultural anthropology program at the VU Amsterdam. The support of UAF (Foundation for Refugee Students) was crucial for gaining admission to the university. Yet study in another language and entrance to the university seemed so unreal that I could not quite believe that this dream had come true until I actually found myself sitting next to fellow students in lecture halls. The students were much younger than I was (I was 27 years old), and the first six months of study were not easy, but I was determined not to waste a single second. Being a student gave me a positive perspective that was the complete opposite of my insecure life as an asylum seeker. My refugee background made me dedicated and determined to turn my new life into a success, but I could not do it alone.

My life as a student also helped me to move beyond the trials of the past, to detach myself temporarily from the most painful memories, and to share the more positive ones. The open ears of my fellow students and teachers gave warmth and purpose to my life. In the first few years of my residency, their curiosity and openness in accepting me as a human being with a story to share was crucial. The small number of students and the level of engagement with each other in and out of the classroom made it possible for me to create meaningful connections. Slowly but surely, my contacts with others and the

opportunity to fully take part in everyday life brought joy back to my life. Small conversations grew into special friendships (Ghorashi 2016).

The next phase is integrating into the new society through the job market. It is a common knowledge that working is crucial for refugees in rebuilding self-esteem and in the ability to give back to society. However, Dourleijn et.al (2011) show that the employment rate for refugees is six times lower than for native Dutch. Recent studies (CBS, 2018; Dagevos et al./SCP, 2018) show the same negative pattern. Refugees' entrance into – and long-term inclusion in – the labor market is shown to be difficult, even in organizations with explicit diversity policies and goals for refugee inclusion (Ghorashi & Ponzoni, 2014; Ponzoni et al., 2017). Organizations often lack the necessary reflective and inclusionary capacity to include first generation refugees that may not fit the image of the “perfect norm employee”: either as a result of having a strange accent or not asking the right questions, or not being the right fit (Ghorashi & van Tilburg 2006). Several of our past projects have shown that the self-determination and active participation of refugees can be undermined by, among other things, the effects of decades of “deficit-based” welfare policies that focus on refugees' shortcomings (Ghorashi & van Tilburg 2004; Ghorashi & Ponzoni 2014; Ponzoni et al. 2018). This causes even the most integrated groups to feel undervalued and excluded. In the scientific literature, this is known as the “integration paradox” (Ghorashi 2018). In practice, because of the fixation on the shortcomings of refugees, many lose their self-confidence and end up in a vicious cycle of negativity.

Sarah's story:

An academic engaged project focusing on the inclusion of refugees in society brought various stakeholders together (refugees, policy makers, HR managers, members of NGOs working with refugees) to discuss issues of diversity, power and inclusion. The most profound example of this project was Sarah, who came as a refugee to the Netherlands 10 years prior to the project. When Sarah was asked to tell the group the moment in her life when she felt strongest, her answer was: “I don't think I have such a story.” After encouragement from the group to think about which aspects of her narrative she would consider as powerful, she remained silent. “I don't know,” she confusedly answered after a while. [...] After several sessions in which she kept silent, Sarah ended up telling an astonishing story of herself as a young woman fighting for her freedom and that of other women in an oppressive, male-ruled environment in Eritrea, eventually joining the armed fight for the freedom of her country, leaving her family, social position, and daily certainties behind.

How can one account for the fact that such a story could be forgotten? Sarah who was invigorated by the resurgence of her activist past shared with the participants of the project that during her stay in the Netherlands she had only heard negative responses to all of her questions: “No, you are not good enough,” “No, your language needs to be improved,” “No, you do not have the proper papers.” Several years of constant repetition of these words caused Sarah to lose her self-confidence and most importantly to lose her story. This case shows the power of dominant discourse in one's positioning. The agency which palpably broke free in Sarah during subsequent meetings, because of her recovered self-definition as a political activist and a “fighter,” was one of the most overwhelming impacts of this whole project (Ghorashi & Ponzoni 2014).

The above story shows the power of normalization, illustrating that exclusion can happen even with best of intentions. Many societal and organizational policies intended to increase

inclusion end up exclusive in practice, failing to actually include disadvantaged groups. The growing number of unemployed migrants and refugees in Europe shows that good intentions are not enough. There is a need for reflection on the images, assumptions, and biases that are often blocking the possibilities of inclusion. This requires innovative infrastructures that de-center the normalized mindset of the people in positions of power. And again educational institutions in general and engaged scholarship in particular could play a role here. Through connecting academic and local knowledge engaged scholarship can facilitate various levels of reflection and transformative action towards inclusion. With this idea in mind, I have initiated the Refugee Academy (within the Institute of the Societal Resilience of the VU Amsterdam) in 2017. Refugee Academy is envisioned as a horizontal learning/reflective infrastructure, a kind of capacity building, connecting existing knowledge and perspectives on refugee inclusion from a variety of positions. For us, capacity building has a different meaning than that often used in approaches in the area of development aid (e.g., improving the capacity of marginalized groups). We view capacity building as the urgent need to improve the reflective capacity of relevant stakeholders in positions of power (including academia) through connection with the life-world of refugees. The goals of Refugee Academy are:

- 1) Increasing the **learning capacity** of projects and initiatives so that unnecessary flattening and repetitions are avoided.
- 2) Increasing the **reflective capacity** of governments, organizations and researchers so they develop inclusive competencies. These competencies are necessary to enable these groups to approach refugees from their hidden talents and not from their visible shortcomings (such as language and education). Learning and reflective ability also make it possible to view this issue from various angles and make others think critically.
- 3) Increase the **practical capacity** of all stakeholders involved so they can formulate actions for inclusive practices.

Going beyond the obvious

The idea of initiating Refugee Academy came from several small-scale and innovative engaged research projects such as the example above in which Sarah's story emerged. These projects have shown us that it is critical to go beyond the obvious and conventional forms of research addressing refugees' struggles in their integration trajectory. Existing academic research and societal initiatives often *fail* to grasp the subtle yet sustainable forms of exclusion that exist side by side with inclusive efforts. These efforts lack the experimental and innovative spirit to transcend the obvious and produce ground-breaking trajectories of inclusion. In other words, we need decentering efforts in society and academia to include voices that unsettle robust yet normalized and subtle structures of exclusion. Documenting and analyzing refugees' narratives about their struggles to gain access to the labor market is the first essential step. But engaging with those narratives within capacity-building initiatives such as Refugee Academy is the next crucial step for including stakeholders in identifying sources of exclusion in organizations and stipulating conditions for progress towards inclusion. Engaging with refugees' narratives is essential to bring the policies, the research and the initiatives for change closer to the life-world of refugees and to co-generate sustainable structures of resistance towards the normalizing power of exclusion.

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