

What is in a label? Exploring how labelling shapes refugees' experiences

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Abstract

This essay explores how being labelled as a refugee affects refugees' identities and experiences in the post-displacement context. First, it provides a background to the concept of identity, looking at some of the theoretical perspectives on identity and briefly highlighting how forced displacement impacts the identity of a refugee. Second, it explores the multi-faceted nature of labelling and how once people become labelled as "refugees" they are perceived and treated according to this assigned label. Third, it highlights how labelling can also be actively challenged or reframed by refugees, as conformity is not the only choice available to them.

Keywords: forced displacement, refugees, identity, labelling

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Introduction

The 1951 Refugee Convention identifies refugees as those forced to leave their country due to events such as "persecution, war, and violence" and whose application for attainment of refugee status has been accepted (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, no date). Although the event that forces people to leave their homes is objectively defined ("war" is war), the experience of that event is subjective and complex (refugees will experience war in their own ways). The issue arises when there is an attempt to blur distinctions between the "event" and the "experience" of the event, and to arrive at a reductionist, one-dimensional categorisation (Papadopoulos, 2021). To share an example: the overuse of the trauma label to describe all parts of a refugee's experience ignores that the category of "refugees" comprises diverse individuals with a range of emotions and experiences.

Consider Adil, a refugee child:

- Pre-war: Adil lives somewhere in the East, goes to school daily and has many friends. At home, he enjoys playtime with his younger siblings.

- During war: Adil cannot go to school and sees his close friends being grievously injured or killed. He somehow manages to flee with his immediate family.
- Post-war: Adil arrives in Europe. Here, he appears to be an almost different individual, refusing to attend classes in refugee camps and keeping to himself.

This tendency to interchangeably use “event” and “experience of event” could manifest as follows: humanitarian agencies designating Adil and his family as victims, mental health professionals diagnosing him with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and political leaders and the media portraying his community as contributing to the “refugee crisis” in Europe. However, there are many facets to Adil’s experiences, and the same event will be experienced differently by his family, peers, and larger community. Therefore, the experiences of refugees cannot be neatly slotted into a single definition of experience. As Papadopoulos (2021, p. 14) highlighted, we need to understand the reality of refugees in light of their “complexity, uniqueness and totality.” As the term “refugee experience” is quite broad, comprised of multiple components and highly contextualised, I explore a specific academic perspective on the refugee experience: identity.

Defining identity

In Papadopoulos’s (2021, p. 118) words, “identity (is) the central experience people have of themselves as to who they are.” I introduce three important perspectives on identity which influence my essay.

The first two perspectives focus on identity’s social and relational aspects. While the sociocultural perspective posits that identity is shaped by connections between the social environment and our self (Vågan, 2011), the Social Identity Theory (SIT) emphasises the importance of social affiliations/group memberships in our experiences, e.g., religious affiliations, ethnic groups, school/classroom groups, hobby groups, and so on (Tajfel and Turner, 2004).

The third perspective is that of Papadopoulos (2021), who proposed that two primary parts of identity fit together to form each person’s unique identity. These are (i) the *intentionally perceptible* elements, comprising our perceptions of ourselves and our ecology (relational, social, physical), and (ii) the *imperceptible* parts of our identity that are accessible to us *if* we attempt to become aware of them, such as the aroma of sandalwood, the rustle of leaves, etc. These two parts of our identity form a settled or working arrangement which creates a sense of familiarity, predictability, and stability in one’s life—an *onto-ecological settledness* (Papadopoulos, 2021). Any mild changes in our environment remain imperceptible, allowing us to function as usual, without major disruptions to this working arrangement (Papadopoulos, 2021). This stability should not be confused with rigidity and one-dimensionality—our identity is multifaceted, with Papadopoulos (2021, p. 133) describing it as being “multiple, flexible, dynamic, coherent, consistent, and clear.”

Identity and forced displacement

While identity is relatively stable yet flexible, Papadopoulos (2021) observed that extreme events such as forced displacement can affect one's onto-ecological settledness as a response to the rapidly changing temporal and social contexts. However, the term "refugee identity" is problematic because of the connotation that the identity of a refugee is singular, fixed, and static. While being forcibly displaced could cause the person's identity *to become* unidimensional and unchangeable, it is not inevitably so. Identity is not static; someone does not simply come into existence as a refugee. The assumption that a "refugee" is a completely new person, solely defined by the event of forced displacement, reduces their identity to a fixed, unidimensional construct. Thus, while discussing refugee identities, I focus on the processes and outcomes of the assignment of the "refugee" label on the refugees and their host community and refrain from using the term "refugee identity". I look at the post-displacement context, where labelling typically occurs. Once labelled as a *refugee*—a categorisation that usually carries negative connotations—the person and their social environment shape the label's interpretations. The identity of a refugee gets formed and transformed by factors both internal (their own beliefs, values) and external (their sociocultural context, the surrounding media rhetoric, and the policies, culture, and systems of the host country) (Burnett 2013).

How does the host country construct, interpret, and act in accordance with the refugee label?

The legal label of "refugee"

The legal label of "refugee" determines access to life-saving resources and opportunities, most importantly offering protection and, at minimum, a degree of security. However, it does not capture the diversity and totality of the person's identity (Amnesty International, no date). The interpretation and implementation of this legal label can have important implications. A person who once had a life in their home country and identities associated with that location now exists as a "refugee" in an unfamiliar land (Burnett, 2013).

The sociocultural perspective on the "refugee" label

The modern state with its well-defined and impermeable boundaries has underlined how important our location is to our identity (Clemens, 2007; Mueller, 2023). Our country, village, city, neighbourhood, all these spaces are associated with a sense of familiarity, safety, and belongingness (Clemens, 2007). Identities based on the collective entity of the nation (national identity) are strong and fairly resistant to change, exerting a powerful influence on our perceptions of ourselves and others (Erni, 2013). When a person is labelled as a "refugee", they become categorised as "the other," i.e., a homogeneous out-group perceived and treated as inferior to the in-group (Tajfel and Turner, 2004). Othering, in the context of national identity, leads to the construction of the nation and the natives of that nation as a homogenous "us," with no space for the other to exist alongside (Triandafyllidou, 1998). When refugees (the out-group) enter

these spaces, it may evoke a strong reaction from the in-group (those who identify as the natives) (Žagi, 2021). Thus, this entrance is marked by tensions and attempts to understand, define, redefine, and navigate identities concerning the I (personal identity) and we (social and relational identities).

One response to this influx of outsiders is for the natives to assign harmful identities to the people labelled as refugees and act as if they embodied that identity. Schöpke-Gonzalez *et al.* (2020) found that refugees who had resettled in Germany noted that their donning a hijab provoked negative reactions. Such racist treatment extends to the denial of jobs, secure housing, education, and healthcare (Del Corral and Uuskam, 2017). The label may not only enable but also actively encourage xenophobia and racism against refugees, particularly women refugees, refugees of colour, and Muslim refugees (Pittaway and Bartolomei, 2001). The label, thus, makes refugees vulnerable to second-class treatment in the host country. Another response from the host country is to relegate refugees to the margins of society and to contain and restrict them in “safe” spaces. Hameršak and Pleše (2017) illustrated this: in their study on the spaces that refugees typically reside in, they highlighted how refugees in Croatia are confined to the boundaries of cities near reception centres, highways, and city borders. These negative responses are likely to be expected where the host community’s socio-cultural and identity structure is radically different from the refugees’ country of origin.

In host countries where refugees share a similar identity with the natives of the land, such as having commonalities in language, customs, and norms, then othering is less likely to occur. Social and cultural similarities may help refugees to receive more positive, even favourable, treatment from the host community (Abdelaaty, 2021). Congolese refugees in Rwanda embody this, as the similarities between the two communities have created space for them to develop close friendships with each other (Fajth *et al.*, 2019). However, this is not always the reality. Even in the presence of strong social and cultural similarities between the refugees’ country of origin and the host country, the acceptance and inclusiveness of refugees do not automatically apply. In the case of Sudanese and Yemeni refugees in Jordan, although they are considered to be as Arab as the Jordanians, they are still judged as “different” (Turner, 2023). Similarly, despite the strong cultural similarities between the two communities, Burundian refugees resettled in Tanzania are viewed as strangers and stereotypically called “mkimbizi” (Zhou, 2023; Sturridge, 2023).

However, othering does not have to result in stereotyping and discrimination of refugees by the host community. Driel and Verkuyten (2019) showed how a strong local identity can help in the integration of refugees in the host community—in the town of Raice in Southern Italy, a strong local identity centred around warmth, openness, and hospitality has indeed created a welcoming environment for the refugees.

Politicisation of the label

While the refugee label was initially used to refer to legal and political status, with globalisation and the increasing flow of migration, the label has now become *politicised* (Bedford, 2002). Each country's political leadership, aided by the media, also imposes its own ideas of who and what a refugee is. When individuals are labelled as refugees and accepted by the host country, then it carries an expectation from the state that refugees will sever ties with their original identity and "become something new" (Craig 2012, p. 89). For example, refugees who still retain their older national identity from a nation that is now non-existent (e.g., Yugoslavia) are now pushed to conform to the new identity that the refugee label assigns (Keel and Drew, 2004). Politicians and the media depict the typical refugee as someone uneducated who burdens the economy of the host country and steals jobs from the natives (Burnett, 2013). All refugees are painted as a threat to the country's resources and its people, and this is used to evoke strong emotional reactions from the general public, putting refugees at risk of harm (Schenk, 2021). Therefore, the refugee label has been increasingly used, or in more appropriate terms misused, to marginalise and exclude refugees from the mainstream. However, the media itself can also be used to evoke empathy for refugees and to reach out to the political leadership. In the case of Palestinian refugees, for instance, cartoons have long been used to depict their resilience and portray their humanity in a world that does not see them as human-enough. Cartoons can therefore also be thought of as a powerful political tool (Najjar, 2007).

How do refugees themselves construct and interpret their identity in host communities?

The label of "refugee" can have a profound impact on how people assigned the label perceive themselves. In a study by Berquist *et al.* (2018), some of the refugees who were interviewed mentioned their discomfort with the refugee label. They perceived the label as having been applied *to* them, citing that they had no choice in either accepting or rejecting it. The label itself evoked painful memories of the difficult and turbulent times in their lives. A person can also perceive the refugee label as impacting their social standing. In a study by Byrne (2016) focusing on the identity of Liberian refugees in Ghana, Liberian refugees associated the identity of their refugee status with a lower social ranking in Ghanaian society. The Liberian refugees viewed their refugee status to be tied to a range of negative outcomes *vis-à-vis* reduced access to economic and social opportunities, as well as a psychological sense of lack of agency and disempowerment. Thus, being labelled as a refugee adversely impacts the personal aspects of their identity. Additionally, the impact of the label is shaped by the interaction of a person's multiple identities, producing different realities for everyone (Papadopoulos, 2021). For example, an elderly female refugee may be more negatively impacted by gender inequalities in comparison to younger female refugees/female non-refugees. They may find it difficult to adapt to cultural and linguistic changes, and this affects their access to the labour market, social networks, and other important opportunities in the host country—thus, in this case, age, gender, and refugee status interact in various ways to shape one's experiences (Ekoh and Okoye, 2022).

Since the external pressure to impose the “refugee” label is compelling, this pressure can also affect the person’s internal belief system: the forceful imposition of the label can overshadow other parts of the person’s identity. The person who is labelled as a refugee is expected to conform to the expectations of the label and hence becomes reduced to the functioning of the label (Pérez-Sales, 2010). With refugees constantly being characterised in negative terms, e.g., as weak, low-skilled, and in need of constant support, refugees can start perceiving themselves in the same way. As a result, they can develop a victim identity, i.e., they fall into the role of the “helpless and hapless victim” who must depend on others for their survival (Bauer *et al.*, 2021; Sturridge, 2023). The refugee, a helpless victim of their circumstances, needs to be rescued from their plight. The West-centric understanding of the refugee label, with its excessive spotlight on the trauma and the “extraordinary experience” of being a refugee, contributes to the development and maintenance of this victim identity (Marlowe, 2010). The victim identity ensures one’s survival in adverse circumstances by evoking sympathy for the person (Papadopoulos, 2021). In my view, the problem is that if this victim identity dominates and becomes the primary identity of the refugee, it then hinders the person’s capacity to live and grow. The victim identity is fixed, resistant to change, and does not respect the multifaceted nature of the person. For refugees, this means that their identity could become static, inflexible, and singular (that of the refugee victim) and adversely affect their development (Papadopoulos, 2021).

The label of “refugee” and the agency of the refugee—how the person assigned the label perceives, interprets, and repurposes it

The refugee label is often pathologised, which is problematic as (i) it medicalises distress, forcing people to conform to the stereotypical “sick role” (Summerfield, 2000, p. 423); and (ii) it also fails to account for the range of responses one exhibits toward adversity (Papadopoulos, 2021). Altogether, it ignores the underlying psychological, social, and structural factors that shape the experiences of the person who is labelled as a refugee, looking at them instead as unidimensional beings. As a result, many discard this label in the public domain, restricting its usage to avail certain benefits. African refugees attempting to assimilate into British society would try to fit in by emulating “Britishness” in their interactions and lifestyles, thereby completely rejecting the “refugee” label altogether (Hack-Polay *et al.*, 2021).

Some have also embraced the label of “refugee”. In the case of Lebanese refugees, some report feeling proud of their identity both as Lebanese and refugees, as this identity confers them and their family members with better opportunities (Abdelhady, 2011). As mentioned by Burnett (2013), the attainment of the refugee label is also associated with feelings of liberation and relief. He demonstrated this with the case of participants who highlighted that their identity as refugees allowed them to build a new and better life in the Czech Republic. Similarly, in the study by Bergquist *et al.* (2019), refugees expressed their appreciation of the importance of the label and how it conferred them with a unique perspective on life.

A scoping review on the identity reconstruction of young refugees post their experience of forced displacement highlighted how they have redefined the label of “refugee” (Shahimi *et al.*, 2023). Across many studies, the authors found that refugees reject the stigmatising connotations of the label: instead of accepting the “refugee identity” as their only identity, the young refugees imbued their identity with aspects of their unique socio-cultural, historical, and political contexts. They did not allow themselves to be reduced to victims (Shahimi *et al.*, 2023). The refugees in this review illustrated how their experience of forced displacement also imbued them with a powerful sense of hope, optimism, and yearning for a better life. Refugees can use the refugee label to inculcate a sense of solidarity and connectedness among their group, wherein there is a mutual understanding and acknowledgement of their unique yet connected experiences of adversity. It allows for a sense of co-responsibility to develop, and underscores the importance of being in this journey together as a community (Vigil and Abidi, 2018).

Conclusion

Thus, labelling has a complex impact on identity: when one is forced to become a refugee, it affects how others perceive and respond to them, while it also changes how people assigned the label perceive and portray themselves. The actors and the contexts—whether it is a legal or political entity—the media, or the general public all play an important role in shaping the label. However, the label does not determine identity, and its imposition does not entail passive acceptance: people can choose to reject the label altogether or to reinterpret and redefine what the label represents (Burnett, 2013). In my view, in order to capture this agency, it is important to (i) create spaces where refugees can share their own perspectives and voices on the issues that affect them; (ii) use terminology with sensitivity, e.g., we can shift to using the term “person seeking refuge” (the shift acknowledges that forced displacement is a *part* of their experience and does not define the entirety of the person); and (iii) acknowledge and understand how different identities of a person interact with one another to produce unique realities, e.g., exploring interactions between variables such as psychosocial disabilities, gender, age, race, and refugee status.

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