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"My Brother's Keeper: The Double Experience of Refugee Aid Workers"

2015 MES Student Paper Prize Winner

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Over the summer of 2014, I conducted participant observation at a refugee community center on the Turkish-Syrian border. The community center used a participatory approach and aimed to involve the "affected population," in the words of the project proposal, in their own "healing process." I was interested in the participatory framework of this intervention that incorporated the refugees in the center's work by targeting Syrian refugees as "beneficiaries" while also hiring Syrian refugees as its workers to respond to beneficiary needs.

The language of humanitarian "interventions," and the subject of much critical humanitarian literature, suggests a binary relationship between an active agent—the one intervening—and a passive victim—the recipient of the intervention. Through an examination of participation in this refugee aid project, I examined what happens when the lines blur and subjects of intervention—the recipients, the beneficiaries, the ones in need of "saving"—become themselves the agents of the intervention—the aid workers: when refugees, recipients of aid, are also the givers of aid.

The concept of participation has become a buzzword in development and humanitarian interventions. Participation began as a radical idea seeking to redefine and reverse practices seen as top-down and context-blind, and participation came to be seen as a potential remedy, a tool that could empower beneficiaries of aid. Participation was adopted in refugee contexts where refugee participation in the delivery of aid came to be seen as effective in improving efficiency in protection and assistance, combating refugee dependency, and fostering self-reliance.

Exploring this concept, I wanted to show that neither the linear portrayal of participation, advocated by its supporters as erasing the hierarchies between donors and recipients, nor its critical representation as concealing the location of power it (inadvertently?) preserves, accurately capture the nuanced experiences of the Syrian refugee aid workers I met. These refugee aid workers were not their societies' elites: they came from lower-middle and middle-class backgrounds and had almost all been heading in directions far removed from the career path to which this humanitarian crisis led them. I wanted to pay attention to the structure of the situation in which they were caught without implying that they were swept up in the hierarchies of aid, constrained and disabled. Instead, prompted by Ilana Feldman's work on the productive effects of humanitarian interventions, I looked at the various ways in which this intervention shaped my interlocutors' lives in order to understand what ideas of participation *do*. I explored how the humanitarian crisis and the interventions it mandates has variously positioned these agents in almost random ways, and how through their work they expand the meaning of refugee lives, giving them value in ways often overlooked.

These aid workers were hired as refugees, with the project to be "initiated by refugees themselves," as the proposal explained. The aid workers, themselves part of the group of "beneficiaries" targeted by the center, were therefore both agents and subjects, occupying liminal, blurred spaces, continually transiting between borders: on the job, they were the representatives of the aid organization, while their families continued to come to the center as recipients. Most of these aid workers arrived contemporaneously with, and geographically from, the same towns and villages as other beneficiaries, and many could recognize each other or each other's families from their previous lives in Syria. They shared with their beneficiaries a collective history, but had access to both social and material capital and authority not available to their peers.

Through the stories of several such refugee aid workers I looked at the various boundaries, meanings, and tensions created for those people caught in what Peter Redfield terms a "double-bind," belonging to two worlds yet never fully to either. Expected to occupy both spaces—representing the essence of refugeehood, while simultaneously providing the aid to refugees such as themselves—the aid-workers enjoyed privileges connected to their status, while burdened not only by the difficulties of

refugee life generally, but also by the particular expectations and sense of obligation in which their position placed them.

The paper explores these tensions through field notes and life stories of several of these refugee aid workers, looking at them as actors who shift between positions depending on circumstance, themselves embedded in and affected by their position as both refugees and aid workers. Looking at frontline workers in an aid project, this research attempts to complicate the binary of beneficiary/benefactor towards a more fluid understanding of refugees as people located in various fluctuating positionalities. I conclude that the community center's participatory approach neither altered the structure of power nor erased the hierarchies between donors and beneficiaries. It did, however, result in a model far less susceptible to widespread criticisms of aid projects as inherently patronizing of refugees—ones that inevitably treat them as helpless victims, and grant them little control over the management of their lives. The case study at hand points to the ways refugee assistance projects can be designed to show cognizance of refugee lives as more than merely ones of 'dis-': dis-placement, dis-enfranchisement, dis-empowerment. Mostly, what this paper attempts to show, is that interventions are never neutral, and side effects are inevitably produced. It attempts to trace these effects, highlighting the new hierarchies produced and reproduced by the incorporation of refugees in aid work, and the multiple nodes of identity in which refugee aid workers are located. These hierarchies are not only constraining, but also productive, allowing people to find new paths and new forms of identity. Through their work and the constant negotiation of their position between beneficiary and benefactor, my interlocutors push us to see beyond the "refugee" label that sometimes becomes their sole identity in public discourse.

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