*Agency and Control in Vietnamese Refugee Camps: A View from Settlement Workers*

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the ways in which Vietnamese refugees who were located in transit camps in Southeast Asia in the 1970s and 1980s negotiated the resettlement systems established by western governments. Based on interviews with former refugee workers employed by various NGOs and charities at the time, the paper addresses three questions: 1) How did refugees in transit camps craft their biographies, including information about their family relations and backgrounds? 2) In what ways did they rely on informal social networks in the camps in order to exchange information about what different countries were looking for, questions that were asked during the interview? 3) How did refugees engage in transnational exchanges with individuals abroad who had already permanently relocated to "third" countries? We argue that their active negotiation of the selection systems, which made them appear both eligible for resettlement in some countries, and ineligible for others, was a reflection of their effort to exercise some degree of human agency even in a context where they had little control over their conditions of life.

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The Vietnamese refugee crisis that began in 1975 after the fall of South Vietnam and the associated withdrawal of American troops, and which culminated in the mass exodus of ‘boat people’ beginning in 1978, was a defining moment for the international community, and for many countries of resettlement. The UNHCR helped negotiate a unique ‘orderly departure plan’ with the Vietnamese government and organized a number of international conferences in order to manage the crisis (Boutroue, et al., 2000), while countries like the United States, Australia, and Canada developed various new resettlement schemes in response to the human tragedy that was unfolding in the South China Sea. While some refugees returned to Vietnam in the 1990 as part of the Comprehensive Plan of Action negotiated with the Vietnamese government, many others were selected for resettlement by variousgovernments after spending time in refugee camps variously located in Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Singapore and Indonesia. In total, over 1.6 million refugees were resettled between 1975 and 1997, mainly in western countries (Boutroue, et al., 2000).

A mix of local authorities, as well as western volunteers and members of NGOs, staffed the refugee camps that were created for the Vietnamese, and the latter were responsible for providing comfort and aid to refugees in the camps and help and assistance in order for them to relocate to a safe third country. This paper focuses on the men and women who worked with Vietnamese refugees in resettlement camps in Southeast Asia beginning in the late 1970s. Using oral history interviews with individuals who worked with Vietnamese[[1]](#footnote-1) refugees in resettlement camps in Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia, the purpose of this paper is to examine how refugee aid workers perceived Vietnamese refugees negotiate their process of resettlement. As refugees, the Vietnamese who ended up in camps awaiting resettlement were, in many ways, relatively powerless over the conditions under which they exited Vietnam, which country of first asylum and which refugee camp they ended up in, and which country might select them for resettlement.

Despite this overall lack of control over their circumstances, this paper nonetheless focuses on how Vietnamese refugees tried to negotiate and navigate the process of resettlement and how they exercised what sociologists call ‘agency’: how they exercised an ability to make their own choices in order to shape their own destiny (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).We chose to interview resettlement workers, in part, to gain their perspective on issues of refugee agency, but also as a window into issues that refugees themselves might be reluctant to talk about, even forty years later, out of a concern that they might be perceived as having ‘manipulated’ the refugee selection system to their advantage.

In this context, we examine three interrelated questions:

*1) How did refugees in transit camps craft their biographies, including information about their family relations and backgrounds?*

*2) In what ways did they rely on informal social networks in the camps in order to exchange information about what different countries were looking for, questions that were asked during the interview?*

*3) How did refugees engage in transnational exchanges with individuals abroad who had already permanently relocated to "third" countries?*

As this paper shows, refugees, like other categories of immigrant (Castles & Miller, 2003), are not entirely powerless, and also engage in various strategies, tactics and micro-level calculations in order to gain resettlement in a county that is most desirable from their point of view. It should be noted that although we consider refugees as one category of immigrants, one important distinction between them and other types of immigrants (i.e., investor and economic immigrants) is that they were “forced” to flee their country due to war or other extraordinary circumstances. By contrast, other immigrants usually leave their country “voluntarily” to settle in another. Thus it seems immigrants would have considerable control over their resettlement process compared to refugees. However, refugees also exercise agency: they strategize, talk to each other, and try to figure out ways to convince states to admit them, but also to discourage other states from accepting them. This active negotiation of the refugee process is not simply a sign of bad faith, or of not being a genuine refugee. Rather, it highlights the ways in which refugees actively negotiate their terms of entry to countries of resettlement and shows how refugees use their resources, networks and cultural background in order to exercise some degree of control in an overall context where they are relatively powerless.

**Data Collection**

Data gathered for this study was collected through one-on-one interviews and questionnaire method of 14 individuals who worked in different refugee camps in Southeast Asia in the 1970s and 1980s. We were able to locate these former refugee workers through various social media sites (e.g., “Galang Camp” and “Galang Refugee Camp” Facebook groups) and through a chain referral process (or snowball sampling). Even after decades of resettlement, the time spent in transit camps remains one of the important and meaningful life experiences for both refugees and the frontline aid workers who provided support to refugees. It is understandable then, that they continue to seek out each other, especially since modern technologies have made it easier for people to do this.

Our participants included volunteers and workers of different 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, administering health care services, conducting basic screening of refugees for voluntary agencies, and providing education training and cultural orientation to volunteer teachers – who in turn, taught classes to refugees. Aside from these more obvious tasks, refugee workers also acted as a source of comfort for refugees. They provided the refugees the much needed emotional support and words of encouragement, especially from the disappointment of being rejected for resettlement.

Our interviewees now live in various countries around the world, including Indonesia, Uganda, the U.K., and the U.S. As far as age is concerned, many participants are now in their 60’s with a few in their 50’s and 70’s. A number of them continue to be involved in some capacity with refugees and underprivileged or marginalized populations in their own country or internationally. All of our respondents are non-Vietnamese but several speak fluent Vietnamese, and one is also fluent in Khmer. This is helpful to our study since it indicates the level of understanding and knowledge they may have about Vietnamese refugees.

We asked questions 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 refugee workers in refugee camps were invaluable to us. Refugee workers were in a unique position – as noted, they acted as facilitators, teachers, health workers, and often as psychologists who were instrumental in guiding these refugees on their journey to resettlement. These workers therefore offer us insights into how Vietnamese refugees in the camps negotiated the process of transition from refugee camp life to resettlement abroad.

Though refugee workers did offer guidance and information, often their more important role was that of a therapist, giving emotional support to those who had been traumatized. As such, we also spoke to them about their feelings about their work, and how it impacted them and their families later in life. Often the refugee workers were aware of the need to fulfill this latent function. One worker describes his experience in this way:

I watched the refugees stagger on to the shore from old boats that were on their last legs. I felt sorry for them as they had gone through so much for a cause that they probably didn't have much choice in deciding… I went into Indonesia… to select teachers who would work with the refugees… We secured wonderful teachers who understood and empathized with the refugees. (George R.)

Another refugee worker recalls the tenacity of refugee workers who themselves were refugees:

It was always amazing to me that almost every time someone was rejected for resettlement they came right back to work even though they were recovering from the bad news of having been rejected prolonging their stay in the camp and making their future even more uncertain. The most we could do was to say that maybe the next interview would be better.

It was difficult to relate to the waiting, the unknown and what the refugees were enduring. “Keep busy”, “volunteer,” were the suggestions but I never really completely comprehend the emotions that were involved. There was pure joy, however, in being accepted to a country, any country really, but the emotions of being rejected for resettlement were usually not visible. Somehow when they came to work at the schools as a teacher, an artist, an office worker or the more than twenty other volunteer positions, I did not very often discuss [asking] the results of the interview. (Mike)

Thus it seems that this work is a “calling” – one that demands a great deal from the individuals who choose to pursue it. They must be rich not only in knowledge and stamina, but in understanding as well. It is a quasi-therapeutic relationship, which involves both transference and counter-transference. The workers are profoundly affected by this experience and often permanently changed by it. One respondent called it: the most significant experience of his life, and his remarks deserve to be quoted at length:

It was the most significant experience that shaped my life’s future. In 1985 I was about 27 years old and meeting my wife and being involved in the refugee resettlement program basically defined the direction that I went in, for the rest of my life until now [sic].

I came from a very, probably upper middle-class background. I had no experience in my life having to live in danger or not having enough to eat – or anything beyond the ordinary. So now when I pick up the paper and I read about anywhere: Rwanda, Yugoslavia, Sudan, or the Ukraine – anywhere where there’s fighting and refugees going on – I have an appreciation for what’s happening there that I probably would never have had if it hadn’t been for this.

I don’t think my friends, the people I grew up with have a real idea of what it means to be a refugee, to be fleeing from your country, because it’s too dangerous to live there, or to live under the conditions where you’re afraid that people will attack you, or do harm to you. If you haven’t seen with your own eyes and met people directly who’s gone through that, it’s very difficult to appreciate and understand. (George)

This respondent’s experiences as a refugee camp worker have better enabled him to deal with the problems he now faces in his personal life. As he points out, his family life will never be “ordinary”:

My wife and her family, they all have some level of post-traumatic stress disorder. It’s part of who they are – and the way their life is now, is very much influenced by the trauma that they’ve experienced. They have trouble dealing with many things that I find very simple to do. To them, they would be very stressful. If they think someone is cheating them or not treating them fairly, they react to it in a much more extreme way than I would, or someone who hasn’t been traumatized. Post-traumatic stress, I think, is something that changes someone’s personality. You can’t change it back. It becomes part of who they are – you can’t undo it. If my wife were an average American woman, a lot of the thing we have difficulty with would be very easy, from the way we raise our children, to our relationship, it’s all shaped by this experience. (George)

Nevertheless, this interviewee would not have it any other way:

It’s a defining experience in my life and I’m very grateful for it. It’s made me a better person; given 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. (Ibid.)

**Refugees, trauma, and human agency**

Forcible displacement is obviously traumatic. Indeed, diaspora studies (Safran, 1991; Cohen, 2008) scholars use a groups’ traumatic dispersal from their country of origin as a way of differentiating between conceptually different types of diasporas. For example, Robin Cohen (2008) argues that ‘victim diasporas’ are comprised of those who are forced to leave because of persecution in their country of origin; labour diasporas on the other hand are comprised of groups of people who are forced to leave their countries of origin because of traumatic economic conditions associated with the loss of jobs or other economic opportunities.

Part of the trauma associated with refugee displacement is connected to the reason for initial dispersal, which usually involves either the threat or reality of violence at the hands of others (Castles & Miller, 2003). But part of the trauma is also connected to not knowing one’s future, and being subject to forces that are beyond one’s immediate control. In the case of refugees, there are at least three moments when such lack of control is evident. Refugees have little control over conditions in their home countries that make them refugees to begin with. Political regimes, state and non-state sanctioned violence against an ethnic or religious group, are clearly not something that the victims of violence or oppression have much control over. When refugees end up in relocation camps, the trauma of dispersal is further reinforced by a lack of control inside the camps. Camps are often created in haphazard ways by governments trying to cope with large-scale relocations, and are staffed by a mix of government officials, representative of international NGOs and charities. Everything from housing, to food, water and shelter is supplied, and refugees have little control over the nature of, or pace at which such support is given. Finally, refugees appear to lack control over the policies, procedures and criteria countries use to select them for resettlement. They must wait to be selected by one of the Western countries and that process tends to depend on a resettlement country’s timetable, and not their own.

The academic literature on life in refugee transit camps tends to focus 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 largely passive in the face of processes over which they have no control. Descriptions of camp life for Vietnamese refugees tend to focus on the boredom, uncertainty and feelings of helplessness on the part of refugees in transit camps (Chan & Loveridge, 1987). Referring specifically to the Vietnamese in refugee camps in the 1970s, Kelly (1977) argued that: “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 (p. 81).

In another study of camp life for Vietnamese refugees in the Philippines, Hong Kong and Japan, Knudsen (1983) describes life as “meaningless, uncertain, waste of time, boring and passivizing”(p. 170). This picture of camp life for Vietnamese refugees is further reinforced by Chan and Loveridge’s (1987) research on Kai Tak camp near Hong Kong in the late 1970s. Though they argue that there are significant differences in life in 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 argue that feelings of helplessness and passivity were the defining features that characterized camp life at that time. As they explain, the refugee is:

[T]hus 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.(Chan & Loveridge, 1987, p. 754)

This view of refugee camp life 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 World War Two (Isajiw, Boshyk, & Senkus, 1992). Though also traumatized by forced dispersal, and also suffering severe forms of psychological trauma, the picture of camp life that emerges in that context is one of intellectual creativity, community vitality, intense activity among rival political factions in the camps (Markus V. , 1992), and refugees being actively engaged with the process of being selected for resettlement. The studies of displaced person camp life contain many accounts of active women’s associations (Bohachevsky-Chomiak, 1992), youth groups, theatre productions, dance ensembles and sporting events (Revutsky, 1992) and educational activities (Wynar, 1992). Many of these activities seemed to be organized by refugees themselves, and were undertaken to not only relieve the boredom and despair associated with the refugee situation, but also as a way of maintaining a sense of identity.

Though the level of social organization and community self reliance within camps may indeed have been different for Vietnamese and Eastern European refugees, we suggest that the latter view of life in refugee camps may be more accurate insofar as it emphasizes how refugees engage in agency even in the context of significant structural constraints and limitations.

At the outset, it should be noted that upon their arrival in various countries of first asylum in the region, a large majority of the refugees lacked proper documentation to help establish their background and personal identity. This was not uncommon at the time due to the chaotic and dangerous circumstances involved in their attempt to escape Vietnam. This, however, presented a major challenge for both the authorities and the refugees themselves when a complex system of paperwork had to be carried out in order to prepare the refugees for resettlement to one of the safe third countries. Refugees thus faced the daunting task of having to reconstruct their personal history in ways that would sound credible and convincing to authorities (i.e., immigration officials), who were, in effect, in charge of their fate.

Our interviews with refugee workers revealed that refugees were in fact adept at maintaining some control over their destinies. There were a number of strategies that refugees used to make themselves appear more acceptable to a country which they hoped would accept them. This, of course, depended to a great extent on the way in which a country would categorize different types of refugees. It would thus be helpful to briefly discuss these categories. Generally, the most important criterion for acceptance by different countries, particularly the U.S (which was also the first choice for many of the refugees[[2]](#footnote-2)), 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 U.S. Unaccompanied minors represented the second category. This included children under18 years-of-age who were in the camps alone. The third category included former South Vietnamese military personnel as well as those who worked for the U.S government during the war. Those with distant relatives in the U.S were considered next. Lastly, refugees without any connection to the U.S, but who had been rejected by at least two other countries were also considered for resettlement.

Canada’s policies were similar to those of the U.S – that is, Canada also considered family reunification as a priority, although our respondents have 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. In other words, in order to be accepted by Canada, it was particularly important that refugees could demonstrate their employability skills. As one interviewee 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” (Mike).

It should be noted that during this time, Canada developed its innovative private sponsorship program to help with the refugee crisis. 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”[[3]](#footnote-3). 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[[4]](#footnote-4)

Australia, while also focused on nuclear family relations, accepted young families as well. Being a single young female was considered an asset. “The Australians had a reputation for accepting young single women”, recalled one interviewee, “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” (Doug). Resettlement policies of different countries were not always straightforward in their application. Another interviewee noted that, “resettlement seemed like a lottery of arbitrary justice within a massive labyrinth of deception” (Mike). Feeling somewhat exasperated about the process of selecting refugees, this interviewee and other refugee workers came up with their own description for each country’s policy. For examples, it was noted that, “Australia accepted the most attractive women” (Mike).

Other smaller European countries, especially those that make up the Scandinavian Peninsula, and New Zealand accepted a very small number of refugees. These countries did not have a clear system of selection criteria. Instead, their policies were more often based on the “need to fill quota” basis. 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.

*How did refugees in transit camps craft their biographies, including information about their family relations and backgrounds?*

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 biographies in ways that are advantageous for them. The reframing of one’s past life often involves the creation of strategic family connections, where no such connections actually exist. This of course requires a great deal of ingenuity and creativity on the part of the refugees, but as we will see, it can also lead to unintended and unanticipated consequences.

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 speaks to the need for family connections. He explains that his wife’s family had a friend in California. This man had lost his wife in the genocide, and coincidentally, his wife’s mother had also lost her husband. Our respondent explains:

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 U.S 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 U.S. (George)

The attempt to construct family connections also involved the changing of names. As one interviewee revealed: “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” (Daniel). Changing one’s age was another common practice for the refugees, because “the older the refugees were, the more problem they faced in being accepted by different countries” (Emmy). Another example of the reframing of biographies was offered by a respondent who spoke of the strange case of the “brother and sister” – but were they really?

There was a young man and woman. They had already been accepted to leave for the U.S. So I was interviewing them, not for their admission interview, but the resettlement interview. [T]here 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 U.S., 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. (Michael**)**

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 the worker in question was aware, there is a huge difference between what one knows (or suspects) and what can be proven. He continues:

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 it is important to note that this effort is complicated by important differences in Eastern and Western cultures, which may have legal ramifications. The aforementioned respondent cites another instance of fabrication, which in spite of its obvious inconsistencies, was nevertheless steadfastly adhered to by the refugees involved, because they were aware of potential legal problems in the West:

There’s a story of a man and two women with ten children. 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 U.S, 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. This tendency has deep roots in Eastern culture, particularly in Vietnam. The need to hide what one cherishes the most is connected to not only a traditional fear of arousing the wrath of jealous gods, but also to a more contemporary and understandable mistrust of the motives of authority figures. Vietnam has a long history as an agrarian society and therefore large families are valued, but war diminishes this human resource, making it necessary to “hide” one’s sons. Thus, as our respondent explains:

The first-born son often took on the identity of the next younger brother and so on, until the last one. Parents would claim that they never got around to registering the birth because they lived in a rural area or because fighting was going on. So later they just went to the court and got one (a birth certificate) for the baby of the family.

In Vietnam, having a large family often means that children will be referred to as numbers, rather than according to names. This is also linked to the practice of identity concealment. Usually the first-born son or daughter is never called #1, he or she is always called #2, and it continues all the way down the family hierarchy. Thus if the child is identified as #9, that child is actually the 10th child of the family. As well, children are often given unattractive nicknames (e.g., smelly, shorty, stupid, and scarface) in order to avoid attracting the attention of so-called evil spirits who might come to kidnap the child.

This practice raises several social psychological questions that cannot be answered definitively, so any attempt to explain these customs is speculative and intuitive. It is possible that in Vietnam, as is the case in other agrarian societies, children are seen as expendable – nothing more than a kind of natural resource which may be renewed almost endlessly.

It is also possible, however, that these practices are indicative of the need to maintain emotional distance from one’s children. In agrarian societies, in particular those of the past, there were indeed evil forces which would spirit away one’s children, but they were not jealous gods. Instead, they were infectious diseases and natural disasters, which could wipe out one’s family almost overnight. Under such circumstances, how is it possible to truly love children who may be taken from you at any moment? To do this would be to leave oneself open to unimaginable psychic pain. It is much safer, then, to protect yourself by distancing yourself from the potential cause of that pain. To identify one’s children by number rather than by name may be a form of emotion work - a survival mechanism. Similarly, the apparent ease with which one’s life history is reconfigured in the refugee camp is also a survival mechanism. It may not only be a legacy of the war and a response to an uncertain future, it may have a much deeper taproot. Although the connection between agrarian traditions and pragmatic behavior in the refugee camps cannot be empirically verified, the possible linkages are intriguing.

*In what ways did they rely on informal social networks in the camps in order to exchange information about what different countries were looking for, questions that were asked during the interview?*

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. One interviewee talked about the resourcefulness of the refugees. As he elaborates:

There were daily rumors (in Galang) about the moods of the interviewers, which interviewer to avoid on a certain day, even which clothing color 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)

The above story shows how refugees were in fact 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 U.S. 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 he or she stayed in refugee camps. A male interviewee whose job was to “pre-screen” refugees for their interviews with U.S immigration observed:

[A] lot of the strategies that people used to make themselves more acceptable was awareness, which overtime 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. (Michael)

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

Rumors fueled 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. (Doug)

As the above account shows, the officials of various countries involved with selecting particular refugees for resettlement were not unaware of the efforts being undertaken by refugees to make themselves 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 personal 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 refugee 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 U.S. But how could this be established when often people had no documents? We have seen, that understandably, the refugees had no qualms about the creation of a fictitious world. One interviewee 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)

This interviewee 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.

*How did refugees engage in transnational exchanges with individuals abroad who had already permanently relocated to "third" countries?*

The last theme we explore involves the consolidation of transnational connections, which are themselves a source of knowledge and power. As soon as refugees arrived in the camp, they would be sure to communicate (by letter) with family members. They would ask their advice about the relocation process and their 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.

To be sure, the advice that refugees received from individuals, both relatives as well as non-relatives, who had already resettled played a big role in their crafting of personal biographies and family backgrounds, and the ways in which refugees made good use of their time in transit camps.

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

Another interviewee 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 U.S 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. The account from a former worker illustrates this point:

So 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’. (Michael)

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 U.S. Our above interviewee continues:

Another thing is once people began to hear stories from relatives and friends in Western countries (other than the U.S), 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. Our same interviewee above recalled a story about a Vietnamese young man he met in the U.S 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 false identity during his time in the refugee camp. He had given himself a false identity in order to appear to be a member of another family. As a result of this fabrication, 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 another interviewee put it, it is not always a good idea to follow the advice of others. As he explains: “I would advise them to follow the guidelines set by UNHCR and the resettlement countries ignore the bad advice some refugees received from their relatives overseas. Just answer some questions accurately and truthfully” (Mike).

This is not to say that all refugees embraced advice that they have been given uncritically without pondering the possible consequences. For example, one young man who had received a copy of the U.S immigration guideline (now outdated) noticed that communists and homosexuals were barred from entering the U.S. 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 refugee worker about it and was told, “it didn’t apply to him and not to worry” (Mike).

**Conclusion**

Immigrant selection and refugee selection involves ‘marrying’ general immigration rules and criteria to individual cases. Immigration officials, including those charged with selecting refugees for resettlement, must apply those rules and ‘fit’ them to real world cases. In the case of the selection of Vietnamese refugees for resettlement, countries of resettlement had their own criteria and priorities for differentiating between those who were eligible for resettlement and those who were not. Assessing whether a person is eligible for resettlement within a given country’s immigration and refugee framework is an inherently discretionary process and involves selection officers making decisions to dig deeper into some aspects of an individuals biography or application but not others, and then using various flags, indicators and profiles to assess credibility and risk (Satzewich, 2014). Selection officers can chose to emphasize some rules or criteria over others, or look the other way if there is not a perfect correspondence between an individual’s biography and their eligibility for entry or resettlement.

The challenges of refugee selection are no doubt heightened because of the emotionally laden nature of the work. Immigration officials who are responsible for selecting refugees no doubt recognize the multiple forms of trauma and victimization that individuals experienced in order to make it to a refugee camp in the first place. At the same time as recognizing that virtually all of the Vietnamese in camps were genuine refugees, they nonetheless had to make selection decisions that conformed to what their particular policy was looking for in a refugee*.*

As such, we recognize the tremendously difficult condition under which immigration officers had to work. As one respondent who worked closely with western immigration officials recounts: “We would go for weeks, months at the time and we would do nothing but interviewed. From early morning until 9:00 at night in a bamboo shack, no electricity – we would [be] just interviewing and interviewing” (Michael). Indeed, officers needed to solve the refugee crisis very quickly - that is, to move them out of refugee camps – for fear that local authorities would stop accepting the refugees and would start pushing them out to sea. “There was a sort of unspoken pressure”, continues our interviewee above, “to get these people out of here - we may not be so welcoming next year” (Ibid). In reality, however, this procedure of moving the refugees was very slow due to the waves after waves of refugees continuously arriving.

At the same time, individual immigrants and refugees must also negotiate the bureaucratic selection process. From their point of view, they need to try to ‘fit’ their biographies with the established selection criteria of countries. This too is an arguably discretionary process in which applicants need to control the information they give about themselves to make them appear acceptable to some countries, and not acceptable to others. Their discretion is reflected in their human agency, and the ways in which they craft their identities, their relationships and make use of their transnational connections, in order to gain resettlement in a particular country.

Today, much of the public and political discussion focuses on so-called “bogus” refugees: economic migrants who deliberately manipulate internationally recognized refugee protection norms to bypass immigrant selection systems (Henry & Tator, 2010). Though the refugee workers recount stories of embellishment, telling untruths, and the crafting of biographies or relationships, this does not alter the fact that the people they were interviewing were genuine refugees. Data in this paper should not, therefore, be interpreted as evidence that Vietnamese were not genuine refugees or in *bona fide* 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 experience to planning their escape to making it in transit camps – serves to illustrate 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 the sites of incredible despair and suffering – and places where those who are awaiting resettlement are buffeted by processes that are beyond their control, this does not mean that refugees are completely powerless in these circumstances. The picture of Vietnamese refugee life that has been painted in some of the previous literature needs to be modified through a better understanding of the limited forms of agency that refugees have. Though they do not control the selection criteria of various counties, 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.

Our research also demonstrates that resettlement is difficult in both practical and emotional terms. Refugee camp workers played multiple roles in this endeavor. The experience of working with refugees in resettlement camps is a reciprocal one, which offers immense benefits to both the refugees and the workers – and as we have seen, the workers have been profoundly changed by the relationships formed in the camps, and this fact itself speaks volumes. Given that there is no end to the global refugee crisis, the need for the contributions of such dedicated individuals will continue.

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1. Although there were also Cambodians and Laotians, Vietnamese made up the majority of the refugee population in refugee camps. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The preference for going to America has its origin in the Vietnamese language. Due to the outcome of the mass evacuation at the end of the war and the subsequent resettlement of those evacuees in America, the term “đi Mỹ” (going to America) evolved to signify “đi vượt biên” (to escape). Thus, escaping generally means going to America. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Enright, M. (2015). *The Vietnam War: Canada’s Role, Part Two: The Boat People.* CBC Radio. (http://www.cbc.ca/radio/rewind/the-vietnam-war-canada-s-role-part-two-the-boat-people-1.3048026). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Summative Evaluation of the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program: http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/evaluation/psrp/psrp-summary.asp#s1.0 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)