

“This IS what you want! This is what you signed up for!”: How Agencies Responsibilize Resettling Refugees

Kelsey Wilber: McNair Scholar

Dr. Ginna Husting: Mentor

Sociology



Abstract

US refugee resettlement agencies face a daunting task: they are federally mandated to achieve resettlement within a severely restricted time frame and funding limit per refugee, all while creating integrated, “self-sufficient” US citizens. As a result, resettlement agencies must guide resettling refugees through a rigidly scheduled set of activities that are designed to expunge ‘dependency’ while finding resettling refugees jobs, homes, schools, and community belonging. Interviewing resettlement case workers and volunteers in a northwestern US city, I find that staff respond to this double bind by using informal tactics to transform the character of resettled refugees into good neoliberal ‘American’ subjects, such that economic self-sufficiency becomes a ‘sign’ of worthiness for US citizenship. Staff and volunteers responsabilize resettling refugees by redefining economic self-sufficiency as a mode of self-care and by encouraging refugees to adopt a strictly short-term cost-benefit rationality. These governmentalized tactics obscure the precarious positions of many resettling refugees and instead implement a new configuration of ‘barely making it,’ which is hidden by the invisible, unpaid labor of volunteers and caseworkers as they try to sustain refugees who have far too few resources.

Introduction

Ruby had been involved in refugee resettlement in Boise, Idaho, for more than ten years. First a volunteer with a local resettlement agency, she claimed she “badgered” case managers and employees continually in an effort to understand how to best serve the community she felt endeared to. When employment opportunities opened, Ruby shifted into a paid full-time position at the resettlement agency. Speaking with her, it is clear she cares deeply for her clients. In her stories, she nicknames clients ‘Little Mama’ and ‘Happy Grandma,’ and openly cries while narrating tender or tragic moments. Ruby speaks of the strength her clients bring with them. She is amazed “to see how resilient that [these] families were, and how families, in spite of the [resettlement] program, are successful” (Ruby). At the same time, Ruby describes the resettlement program as a way of “shifting [to] a mindset of, ‘I want to be self-sufficient.’”

Resettlement agencies are tasked with transforming the “dependent refugee” into an economically viable citizen, an individual free from the coils of public assistance and able to bootstrap their way to success. The limited length of resettlement programs, four to eight months depending on the program, creates a sense of urgency for resettlement agents who rush to impress upon refugees tools needed to survive the new landscape. Most importantly, resettlement agents work to transform the character of refugees into acceptable, self-reliant subjects who earn money as quickly as possible in order to satisfy program requirements.

Tactics are devised by resettlement agents and volunteers to ‘shift the mindset’ of the refugee client away from dependence-oriented behaviors, and encourage self-sufficiency through a rationality of self-care, whereby “responsible behavior amounts to caring for the self” (Hache 2007:58). Tactics focus on creating responsible subjects, refugees who adopt behaviors reflective of understanding economic self-sufficiency. However, because the tool of responsabilization sets aside the many external contributing factors to an individual’s success and instead focuses it internally, concern for the refugee population that has limited access to resources guides us to the question Hache (2007:57) poses: “who can be responsible?” To understand how refugees are responsabilized, I use Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘neoliberal governmentality’ in two ways; first to understand the tactics by which resettlement agencies and agents sculpt the subjectivities of refugees, and secondly to critically assess the rationale structuring caseworker and volunteer relationships with refugees.

Responsibilization occurs through shifting responsibility from the State to the individual, but also through the individual’s desire to take on the role as responsible (Hache 2007:52). However, tactics to reshape the

subjectivities of refugees are built from particularly narrow notions of dependency which don't allow for the complex lived experiences and needs of refugees. Grace, Nawyn, and Okwako (2017:43) investigated how refugees reconstruct households in order to live within the reality of a restrictive "market citizenship." The ability of refugees to access economic opportunities, or the lack thereof, constrains citizenship and community engagement. In order to survive in an environment that places the value on economic producers, families reorganize themselves according to a "neo-liberal citizenship ratio," an arrangement whereby those who are not able to access community resources or are able to shift working family members amongst non-working members are at a greater disadvantage (Grace et al 2017:43).

The process of transforming the subjectivities of refugees is explored by Uehling (2015) in her article, *The Responsibilization of Refugees in the United States: On Political Uses of Psychology*. Uehling found resettlement service providers used psychological tactics to encourage refugees "to think and behave more like Americans" (2015:1004). Federal programs use ideals of rugged independence and individual responsibility to shift mindsets away from reliance on others and dependency on public assistance. Cultural orientation classes train refugees to think in individualistic terms, especially within family and community relationships, and frames the refugee self as solely responsible for outcomes they are experiencing.

Uehling uncovers economic self-sufficiency as the heart of the cultural classes and training; by getting refugees to identify themselves as owning responsibility in relationships, resettlement service providers are creating an environment where every aspect of refugees is governable. Resettlement service providers used tactics such as 'I' statements, techniques to shift thinking, and reorienting gender roles to fit American ideals. Whereas Uehling examines the role responsabilization plays in "family-strengthening" programs and reconstruction of gender roles, I look specifically at the tactics used by caseworkers and volunteers to instill self-sufficiency as a measure of success. Uehling's research provides a strong base to inform my own research in terms of responsabilization's importance in the resettlement process.

Methods

This case study uses qualitative interviews from seven participants associated with the refugee resettlement program in a northwestern metropolitan city. Four of the participants either worked or volunteered with resettlement agencies. Two were directors of a volunteer outreach group renamed for this study World Friends, an organization that places community members in mentor-like roles with refugees under the umbrella of friendship. These citizen volunteers become 'friendship mentors' to refugees and help them adjust to life through doing 'friendship' activities. The remaining participant was a student who had exited refugee status and would regularly work for resettlement agencies as a translator or assist with English-learning classes.

Interviews took place between May and August 2018 and lasted for an average of 90 minutes. The interview questions were open-ended, focusing on their experience within the resettlement process as well as the topic of self-sufficiency. In addition to interviews, I collected text materials such as handbooks and training material. Whenever possible, I participated in events offered to the community to spread awareness of and celebrate the diversity of people resettled as refugees locally. This included refugee and diversity conferences, a citizenship ceremony, and a 'Neighbor Narrative' which hosted refugees to speak about their story and answer questions from the public at the local library.

Responsibilizing Refugees

The transformation that responsabilization induces is continuous and requires ongoing maintenance from multiple sites of influence. Whereas World Friends sets about instilling self-sufficiency through making responsible community members, resettlement agencies do so by making responsible employees. The federal program of resettlement tackles the issue of self-sufficiency through an employment-focused approach. Resettlement agencies are given a list of scheduled activities to be met by refugees in order to receive federal funding.

Ruby describes the federal resettlement program as "a little cut and dry. It's financial self-sufficiency, and they do take a look at what are the other things that more well-roundedly make us self-sufficient. But honestly from a federal perspective it's, it's, um, it's more simplistic with those markers of self-sufficiency." Becky, a case manager from another local resettlement agency, reiterates the focus on financial self-sufficiency with the goal of self-sufficiency at the end of the grant terms (four months for Matching Grant and eight months for Transitional Refugee Assistance). This narrow time window pressures caseworkers to ensure refugees are able to navigate the 'real world' after exiting the resettlement program. Below, I elaborate tactics used by caseworkers and volunteers to induce

responsibilized self-sufficiency in refugees: defining the individual; self-sufficiency as a mode of self-care; and economic guidance and understanding of costs-benefits.

Self-care and self-sufficiency

Consistent with neoliberal resettlement practices, the importance of personal responsibility is pressed on refugees throughout resettlement and from many nodes of influence: employment specialists, English teachers, job skills trainers, volunteers, health specialists, and case managers. A statement in a brochure from a local resettlement agency illustrates the importance of personal responsibility, stating, “[w]e encourage our clients to take charge of their own job search and to leverage their community contacts, which gives them pride in ownership of the process. If a person is truly motivated to work, there is no barrier that cannot be overcome.” Rife in this statement is the responsibility of refugees to become economically self-sufficient. Obstacles, such as time limits and financial ability, are minimized and everyone is imagined on equal footing, able to progress in direct proportion to the effort made by the individual. The resettlement agency, the community, and the U.S. government are all bereft of responsibility for the refugee’s well-being; it is now managed with properly motivated self-care.

In order to assume responsibility, subjects must see themselves as rugged, self-reliant individuals, but agencies see incoming refugees as mired in abject dependence, which must be broken. Leon has worked in relief development for over twenty years and is the co-director of World Friends. He explains the dependency mindset begins in refugee camps, as refugees are provided with services necessary for survival and continues with the service-oriented nature of resettlement agencies. Because he believes resettlement agencies continue the dependency mindset, the role friendship mentors play in community integration must also foster self-sufficiency. Friendship mentors make weekly visits to the home of an assigned, newly arrived refugee to help them adjust to resettlement in the States. World Friends provides their volunteers with conversation cards which focused on tasks such as how to pay a bill or how to find a job. The cards are used to help the friendship mentor feel at ease while also educating the refugee.

The World Friends Handbook addresses the issue of self-sufficiency and establishes a guideline for friendship mentors to use when visiting refugees. In order to crush the dependency mindset, friendship mentors are advised to teach refugees skills rather than do activities for refugees, help them differentiate between needs and wants, give time and not money, and setting clear boundaries that establish a friend relationship rather than that as a provider. These guidelines not only protect friendship mentors from being taken advantage of, but also allow refugees to take inventory of what they bring with them. It is understood by friendship mentors that, although refugees arrive as dependents, underneath is a valuable skill set to use towards a type of self-sufficiency; friendship mentors are there to help it emerge. Refugees who are able to identify their own special skills can visualize themselves as capable individuals able to contribute to the community.

Leon developed a device for friendship mentors to help refugees uncover this skill set and integrate into society without dependency. He exhorts friendship mentors to identify the “gifts” refugees bring “through the head” (things refugees know and can talk about/teach), “hands” (know how to do), and “heart” (topics that are cared about). He explains:

[Friendship mentors] do that by not just giving, but they really try to explore the person themselves... In the training I talked about the idea of head, heart and hands, and in their relationship trying to explore the capacities and the things that the refugee may have in terms of gifts, in terms of their own community. Things that they can bring to bear to solve their own problems. So, to encourage the volunteers to help facilitate a process by which the refugee is really participating, engaged in their own solutions. So, it's not just a matter of solving the problem for them or all of your, you know, you can have this [money or objects]. But it's if you really care about the person you want to see at the end of that process, someone's who's more enabled for a sort of 'build their resiliency' and that sort of way. (Leon)

The friendship between mentors and refugees is used as a tool for transformation of the refugee’s “head, heart, hands.” Acts that would encourage dependency, such as giving money gifts or performing activities for refugees, are openly discouraged and identified as acts of harm because it works against the refugee’s own ability to engage. It is important that refugees understand that the best care is taking care of themselves, that the self becomes a project of care.

Case managers and volunteers through resettlement agencies assist refugees through the process of responsibilization by uncovering what refugees’ want from resettlement. Ruby, for example, describes conversations held early in the resettlement process with clients regarding the program and the refugee’s desires. She states, “[t]his

is the length of our program. These are the things that we want to accomplish. What are some of the things that you want to accomplish? What are barriers to accomplishing those things?" By asking refugees their hopes for work and resettlement, case managers attempt to provide a sense of ownership through aligning personal goals with the program. Minimized in the process is the scarcity of employment and lack of employable skills often mandates case managers place refugees wherever available. Refugees are required to accept their first job offer, often at the detriment of job-skills, English-language classes, and a living wage. Yet, the push for early employment is also part of self-care because nothing is possible if you can't afford it.

Imagining future plans is one part of shifting the mindset of refugees. Setting up a polar opposition relationship between abject dependency and ideal self-sufficiency is another. In agency discourse, the presence of one requires the absence of the other, encouraging refugees to think of the reduction of social services in positive terms even when service reduction means a significant loss of economic and social resources. Ruby does this in the following way:

You know, when people come in and say, oh my, uh, my food stamps got cut, um, I always respond with, oh my gosh, I'm so proud of you! That's amazing! So, then they're like, I don't think you understood what I just said. And I'm like, yeah, I did! I'm so proud of you! That's amazing! That's great! So, it's this, this constant positive reinforcement of, yeah, this is what you want. This IS what you want, this is, this is what you signed up for when you wanted to be in a life of providing for yourself. And a life of self-sufficiency. This is it. (Ruby)

The issue of food stamp reduction is a sign to case managers of progress in self-sufficiency, but for refugees it can be a frightening time of reduced assistance. Because the SNAP program reduces the monthly amount for services when monthly wages increase, it is often a zero-sum event; the household money neither increases nor decreases. However, the moral value of social service reduction is positive. Ruby uses this event as a self-sufficiency marker for refugees to know they are on the right path. Further, it is used as an understanding of how to consider future actions which may not increase the actual economic value of the individual but have a positive moral value because of a self-responsibilizing quality.

Much of the spending that occurs during the first thirty days of resettlement is out of the hands of refugees. The \$925 they receive is used for housing costs and supplies, food and transportation. The remaining amount is given to refugees as 'pocket money.' Becky described a client who demanded a recount of the expenses incurred during the 30 days, certain he was owed more money which he desperately needed to pay rent during the third month. Becky stated the scripted response to this dilemma is "well, you should have saved that pocket money we gave you." His inability to pay rent is attributed to a lack of good fiscal choice-making rather than the additional circumstances surrounding the client as a single, minimum-wage income-earner for a household of five.

Understanding costs-benefit

A fundamental aspect of neoliberalism is bringing the subject to conceptualize themselves as a rational actor, and every choice as an economic choice in which profit and profitability must be calculated and measured (Lemke 2001:201). Case managers and volunteers offer economic guidance for the costs-benefits accounting of practices required by responsabilization; these are seen as 'rational.' Gina is the other co-director of World Friends. She described herself as an educator who has worked cross-culturally and is also Leon's wife. Gina elaborates the organization's mission as providing a meaningful way for refugees to integrate into the community. She states, "we want them [the friendship mentors] to help this new family go: 'Boise is much more than this apartment complex that I'm in and I can enjoy going to the park. I can enjoy going down to the river' or whatever" (24:11G). Her description of successful participation in the community includes activities with minimal monetary cost. This was an important part of the training World Friends does with their volunteers – getting friendship mentors to consider activities with economic prudence. This arises from knowledge of the sparse economic holdings refugees are generally situated with. Both in debt and, if working, often making little more than minimum wage, frugality becomes an important skill set for volunteers to pass on. Gina and Leon named additional activities that were low-cost, such as cheap movie days at the cinema, as well as activities that would provide refugees with an understanding of 'making the dollar stretch,' such as shopping at thrift shops.

An additional example of bringing refugees to govern themselves along a cost-benefit framework occurs with job-skills and English-language classes. Attendance in these classes is required to receive funding through the resettlement program, but occasionally refugees contest attendance. Lisa, an English Language Project Manager, explains the reasoning is "this is basically their job – they're coming here fifteen hours a week instead of working

for forty hours a week – so they get basically some salary for coming here.” Negotiating whether to attend the class or not is a practice of a costs-benefits rationality.

Refugees are free to choose to participate in the obligatory portions of the program; however, refusal to participate is removal from the resettlement program. Very few students, Lisa informs me, choose to exit the program. An individual whom I spoke casually with at a conference explained as a resettled refugee, he had elected to leave the resettlement program because he felt his English was satisfactory and he wanted to focus on employment. Robert, whose English was also satisfactory when he arrived, commented on the difficulties of attending the English language classes. Public transportation is a hindrance to many refugees without vehicles. The city bus lines are limited, and Lisa described instances of refugees riding two hours just to arrive at the English Language Center. This means the requisite fifteen hours a week also carries the burden of transportation time.

When dependency is nurtured and chastised

In one sense, it is commonly accepted that refugees are utterly dependent on the services and care from resettlement agents; they are foreigners to a new country, bringing minimal resources (outside of their hands, head, and heart!) and are loaded with the looming debt of flight fees to the U.S. The federal resettlement program ends after only a few months of residency in the United States, provoking an urgency in training refugees to a place of economic survivability. The rush to meet benchmarks and secure employment allows little room for adequate development of skills which would lead to what most citizens would recognize as self-sufficiency. Increased time spent in both job-skill advancement and English-language classes would give refugees an opportunity to move beyond the low-skill, low-wage jobs they are often relegated to, and often unable to advance out of.

When refugees do actively pursue self-sufficiency, they can be met with resistance from volunteers and case managers. The resettlement program is short with definitive procedures that must be followed and refugees can be perceived to threaten the flow. Becky recounted how a client had expressed that his agency was upset with him for consistently questioning the resettlement process. Becky said that refugees’ silence is often taken as understanding when the opposite is true. But silent ‘compliance’ makes the difficult tasks of staff and volunteers easier:

There was some misconception that, yeah, that to ask questions was kind of bothersome... I found this within the agency, [that] those clients were bothersome. You know, like they weren't trusting us to do our job. But, they were just, it's their future, you know. (Becky)

Dependency is both chastised and nurtured. Refugees, amongst the hurly-burly of a new culture, must learn to navigate when dependency is acceptable and when it is not. Ironically, when refugees do what they are told to do, when they are compliant, things often work out badly. The very inculcation of a “cost-benefit” rationality is itself irrational (Ritzer 1983) and creates deep problems for refugees that will not be easily shifted. Becky’s experience with a client highlights the trouble here; she was having a 30-day budget ‘review’ with a young mother working two jobs who was yet unable to pay for childcare or rent. Such ‘budget reviews’ are designed to ‘help’ clients begin to think in rational economic terms, rather than assuming a position of dependence on the agencies. Becky explains “we went over her budget and we're trying to explain to her the only thing she can do is have a roommate. So, uh, that's, we just try to come up with a plan and then explain to our client what the plan is and why this is the plan.” Through the process of taking a line by line accounting of the young mother’s financial costs, Becky provides her client with knowledge of her economic strengths and weaknesses, so she can make the beneficial choice. Yet, despite the push to economic self-sufficiency, following what Ruby calls the “x, y, z’s” of resettlement doesn’t always end in self-sufficiency.

Conclusion

In most resettlement cases, case managers are heavily involved in the lives of their clients for only four to eight months. After the case has been closed, case managers may see former clients on their rounds to check in on new clients or at community events celebrating diversity. I informally spoke with Becky after she completed her rounds at an apartment complex, dropping off children’s books she collected from friends to refugee families with children. It had been several months since she had been back to this location. She was off the clock, dispensing advice on job skills and listening to transportation woes from new clients as well as refugees who are not assigned to her. “All my old clients are gone,” she says to me, “I hope they’re okay.”

Most case managers and volunteers enter into resettlement out of a desire to help. Hannah, Ruby, and Becky sought out positions in refugee resettlement to interrupt stigmatization of refugees. Once they became resettlement agents, their help was redefined strictly in terms of economic self-sufficiency. But all of the participants I interviewed confessed worrying that the resettlement program causes a kind of harm to the resettlement of refugees. Ruby argued the time constraints and decreased funding prevent the refugee from receiving the care they require. Gina and Leon felt integration in to the community was bypassed in the focus on employment. They came to the work from concern about refugees' wellbeing, but their work is designed primarily to sculpt a compliant subject who thinks of itself and its actions and choices in terms of crude, short-term economics.

Even when case managers and volunteers engage in acts of resistance (e.g., engaging with clients outside of work hours despite being warned not to), their efforts are still designed to bring refugees to participate in the subjugation of themselves. And this after-hour work by case managers and volunteers hides the flaws of the resettlement program since it becomes invisible labor. Volunteers are particularly important parts of an externalized system of care for refugees, because the "x, y, z, then you're self-sufficient" model is simply mythology. Instead, assistance from many locations, often unaccounted for and untraced, enables the survival of refugees. In one example, friendship mentors supplied rides to work for a refugee couple, alleviating them of the four-hour bus ride until they had saved money to purchase a vehicle, even though formally this was out of the purview of the 'relationship' and would have been defined as dependency. Friendship mentors are also able to assist long after the federal resettlement program has ended; and become the main forms of infrastructure and support, while allowing the programs to 'seem' successful.

Grace et al. (2017) and Hache (2007) claim only certain bodies become valuable when self-sufficiency is the determining measure. It is not enough to ask who wouldn't want to be responsible or self-sufficient. Instead, we should ask how we can broaden the definition of responsible or self-sufficient to encompass more forms of wellbeing, interdependence, and support among people. Dilts (2007:143) argues that as governable subjects under a rationality, we "must think not just about how to resist the use of power, but also how to conduct ourselves under those rules ... ethically rather than satisfactorily."

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