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Refugees as People: The Portrayal of Refugees in American Human Interest Stories

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Abstract

This study combines discourse analysis and narrative analysis (Yin 2007) to examine top US newspapers' coverage of refugees in American human interest stories. I find that the refugees are presented (a) as prior victims; (b) as in search of the American Dream; and (c) as unable to achieve the American Dream. As human-interest features, the stories provide a largely positive portrayal of individual refugees and their families. However, the human interest stories also depict refugees as current victims of the American economic crisis; deeply frustrated by their inability to achieve the American Dream. Together these discourses represent a narrative of escape, hope, and then harsh reality for refugees in America's current economic climate.

Keywords: refugees, discourse analysis, America

Although the legal definition of a refugee is well established, in everyday language the word 'refugee' is open to much discussion and interpretation. The United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) defines refugees as persons who have crossed national borders due to a 'well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.' While 14 million refugees met this definition in 2006 (Schweid 2007), there are another 50 million internally-displaced persons, 'environmental refugees' and refugees whose governments are not recognized as 'persecutory' under the UN definition, but who are periodically recognized as refugees by various governments and local communities (see Lee 1996; Myers 1997; Pipher 2002). As a result, refugee status is discursively constructed in the interaction between media, migrants, government agencies, non-governmental organizations and host communities (Hardy *et al.* 2001; Leudar *et al.* 2008; Phillips and Hardy 1997).

Several articles have examined the rhetorical construction of refugees and the general prescriptions for migrant social roles in international news coverage (e.g. Gale 2004; Hardy 1994; Phillips and Hardy 1997; Pickering

2001; Robins 2003; Thweatt 2005); however, these articles have largely failed to examine how refugees are rhetorically constructed through specific media frames (for exceptions, see d'Haenens and de Lange 2001; Robins 2003).

Frames are 'schemata of interpretation that provides a context for understanding information and enables individuals to locate, perceive, identify and label' (Goffman 1974: 21). Media frames, specifically, then are the particular ways in which journalists compose news stories to optimize the accessibility and impact of a story on a particular audience (Valkenburg *et al.* 1999). Research into media frames has demonstrated that news coverage relies on a variety of specific frames to communicate the news to audiences and that different frames can influence readers' or viewers' perceptions of public issues (for reviews see McCombs and Ghanem 2001; McCombs *et al.* 1997; Scheufele 1999).

Valkenburg *et al.* argue that the *human interest* media frame 'brings an individual's story or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue or problem' (1999: 551). By doing so, a human interest frame describes the news in terms that personalize, dramatize and emotionalize the news. Neuman *et al.* (1992) found the human interest frame to be, next to conflict, the second most common frame across a variety of news content. Furthermore, since d'Haenens and de Lange (2001) found the human interest frame to be the frame most commonly used in their analysis of refugee coverage in Dutch newspapers, an understanding of how the personalized, dramatized and emotionalized human interest frame depicts refugees is an important area of study.

Given the role of the media in shaping social and political policy (see Dalton *et al.* 1998; Domke *et al.* 1998; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Shah *et al.* 2002) the discourses surrounding refugees in the American news will likely impact not only how refugees and their roles are defined in American society, but also public discourses on immigration and refugee policy, the development and availability of social programmes for refugees, and to a large extent, the very social climate refugees face in their everyday lives. An examination of the way human interest stories portray refugees in the news, therefore, will reveal one manifestation of the dominant social discourses about refugees in the United States.

Refugees in the United States Context

However they are defined, formal refugee resettlement programmes approved by the United Nations are carried out by 10 countries: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States (Mitrofanova 2004). Of these countries, the US accepts more than double the number of 'official' refugees (under the UN definition) than the other nine countries combined (Singer and Wilson 2007). As a result, more than 2.6 million 'official' refugees have

resettled in the US since 1970 (Austein 2007). The number of refugees experiencing life in the US resettlement context is likely to increase for the foreseeable future. Given the role of the US as the primary destination for refugees resettled 'officially,' it is critical to examine the discourses surrounding refugees in the American news.

In the US, there are legal differences between asylees and refugees based on the individual's location when application is made for asylum. According to US immigration law, a refugee is a person who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her native country due to a well-founded fear of persecution or because the person's life or freedom would be threatened. Specifically, to apply for refugee status, the applicant must be physically located outside the US at the time of application. An asylee, by contrast, also meets the definition of a refugee (i.e. is unwilling or unable to return to his or her native country...) but is residing in the US at the time of application (US Immigration Support 2009). For the purposes of this study, the word 'refugee' will be used in its specific US context, as someone who has been brought into the US through a refugee resettlement program.

News Frames and Social and Public Policy

Hall argues that at all times 'the press performs a significant role as a social educator' (1975: 11). This occurs, as Hall argues, because newspapers do not simply report the news; rather, through linguistic and visual style, presentation and format and their rhetoric for specific audiences and topics, they 'make the news meaningful' (p. 21).

Research has consistently documented that news coverage can focus public opinion on particular topics, and in doing so, can alter the mix of cognitions that are most readily available for individuals when forming political judgments (see Dalton *et al.* 1998; Domke *et al.* 1998; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). This perspective presumes that because a vast majority of citizens do not directly experience politics (nor the events upon which they make political decisions), people frequently form attitudes in response to the coverage of political events they receive from the news (e.g. Iyengar 1991; Edelman 1988, 1995).

As a result, emphasis on certain issues in news coverage is thought to prime the public to focus on particular aspects of those considerations as the basis for their social judgments (Shah *et al.* 2002). For example, researchers have demonstrated that citizens' evaluations of politicians are susceptible to the priming effects of news coverage (see Goidel *et al.* 1997; Mendelsohn 1996). Further, models of media effects on mass opinion suggest that the valence (positive or negative) of news coverage exerts an influence on the course of public opinion (see Fan 1988; Zaller 1992). Thus, as Hall (1975) argues, newspapers 'make the news meaningful' (p. 21) as they shape both the salience and the valence of social and public policies for news consumers.

Refugees and News Coverage

This review relies on depictions of refugees and asylees in international news coverage as a place to begin to understand how refugees are described in US media coverage. However, the word 'refugees' is often used in the international press to refer to both 'refugees' and 'asylees' (as defined in the US). Thus, this section will use the more general term 'asylum seekers' to refer to this broader population so as to avoid confusion.

The extant research on asylum seeker depictions in international news coverage has found that asylum seekers occupy two primary roles in news coverage: frauds or victims. Initially, asylum seekers are often depicted as deviants or frauds, requiring that the state act to protect local communities from the instability and vice they bring. Pickering's analysis of news coverage in Australia found that

refugees and asylum seekers have been routinely constructed not only as a 'problem' population but as a 'deviant' population in relation to the integrity of the nation state, race and disease (2001: 169).

Gale's (2004) analysis of media coverage in Australia, however, found that asylum seekers were also positioned as victims. In addition to reporting the problems caused by asylum seekers, the media ran human interest stories which simultaneously attempted to show their 'human face' (p. 327) by telling their harrowing stories of victimization. Similarly, Robins' (2003) analysis of American newspapers' coverage of the Sudanese 'Lost Boys' found that they were presented as coming from a situation beyond understanding and as vessels waiting to be filled by US material culture. Robins details the ways that common news descriptions like 'a *child-man* with glowing dark skin ... who was clad only in tattered rags [emphasis original]' create an image of 'helpless' and destitute refugees in need of American protection (2003: 35).

Likewise, in their analysis of the United Kingdom's asylum system, Phillips and Hardy (1997) found that media constructions often identify some asylum applicants as bogus claimants undeserving of protection, while granting others legitimate victim or 'genuine refugee' status (p. 176). Hardy and Phillips' (1999) study of Canadian political cartoons similarly found that the most common depiction of refugees (at nearly half of the analysed cartoons) was as frauds with no need for government protection. On the other hand, Hardy and Phillips found that about a fifth of the refugees in political cartoons were depicted as victims in need of genuine protection. Interestingly, another fifth of the cartoons presented the refugees as simultaneously victims and frauds. Thus, news coverage of asylum seekers often positions asylum seekers as frauds, victims, or some combination of both.

Though existing analysis of news coverage of asylum seeker populations has found them to be portrayed as either frauds or victims, little research explicitly examines what types of news frames produce those characterizations or whether asylum seekers might be characterized differently under different

news frames. This study, therefore, examines more explicitly the ways that depictions of refugees in the US are shaped by the human interest news frame.

News Frames and Human Interest Stories

Goffman (1974) defines frames as 'schemata of interpretation that provides a context for understanding information and enables individuals to locate, perceive, identify and label' (p. 21). Entman (1993) elaborates by arguing that in a media context:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular definition of a problem, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (p. 52).

Both Goffman and Entman understand frames as the purposeful selection (or omission) of information by editors and writers which encourages their audience to understand, perceive or interpret stories in particular ways.

For instance, Kahneman and Tversky (2000) have demonstrated that choices between risky prospects can be powerfully altered merely by changing the terms in which equivalent choices are described. When alternatives are described in terms of potential loss, people follow a risk-avoiding strategy, but when the same alternatives are described in terms of potential gains, people follow a risk-seeking strategy.

Similarly, Iyengar (1991) argued that the way that media stories are presented can be divided into episodic and thematic frames. The episodic news frame depicts public issues through the form of a case study or event-oriented report and creates a focus on concrete issues. Examples include 'the plight of a homeless person or a teenage drug user' (p. 14). The thematic news frame, on the other hand, places public issues in a more general and abstract context and focuses on general outcomes or conditions. Examples include reports on 'changes in government welfare expenditures ... and the backlog in the criminal justice process' (p. 14). Iyengar found that episodic news frames were more likely to induce the audience to attribute blame or responsibility to individualistic rather than social causes, while thematic frames encouraged the opposite effect.

Beyond adopting an episodic or thematic structure or structuring the content in positive or negative ways, a number of possible news content frames have been posed as present in news coverage. However, Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) list of frames is most commonly adopted in other research. Semetko and Valkenburg identify five predominant news frames: (a) conflict frame; (b) human interest frame; (c) economic consequences frame; (d) morality frame; and (e) responsibility frame. Initially, Semetko and Valkenburg explain that the *conflict frame* emphasizes the conflicts between

institutions, groups or peoples. Additionally, the conflict frame emphasizes winning and losing and winners and losers in a given news story. Second, the *human interest frame*, on the other hand, places the emphasis on the personal and emotional side of an event, issue or problem. In a human interest frame, the news is typically presented in a narrative format that focuses on how issues affect particular people. Third, the *economic consequences frame* shows the economic impacts of an event, problem or issue for a particular group, institution, individual, region or country. Fourth, the *morality frame* adds a religious or moral dimension to an event, problem or subject. The story may contain a moral message or offer specific codes of behaviour. Finally, the *responsibility frame* presents an issue or problem in such a way that the responsibility for causing or solving the problem lies with a particular government, individual or group. These articles help shape who ought to be praised or blamed for an issue or event.

These different news content frames have also been shown to affect readers' or viewers' perceptions of public issues differently. Price *et al.* (1997), for instance, found that while media frames do not affect consumers' cognitive response to the news, they can direct consumers' topical focus and evaluation of news content. Knight (1999) went further, arguing that frames are powerful mechanisms that can help define and solve problems and shape public opinion. Valkenburg *et al.* (1999) found specifically that human interest frames are negatively related to audience recall of particular facts or details of a news story, and Cho and Gower (2006) found that human interest frames are highly likely to evoke emotional responses from the audience and are in some cases able to provoke audience assignments of blame.

Unfortunately, the existing research on asylum seekers' discursive constructions in the media largely does not examine how they are constructed differently under different media frames. d'Haenens and de Lange (2001) analysed three newspapers from the Netherlands to understand which of Semetko and Valkenberg's media frames were most prevalent in asylum seeker news coverage and found the human interest frame to be most prevalent in both positive and negative portrayals. However, d'Haenens and de Lange do not analyse the content to determine how the asylum seekers are described in the human interest stories. Thus, while we know the frame is prevalent, we do not know what the content within the frame does to discursively construct refugees.

One exception does exist. Robins (2003) performed a textual analysis of the top US newspapers' coverage of the Sudanese 'Lost Boys' who had resettled in the US. Robins found that refugees in newspaper human interest stories 'were presented as coming from a situation beyond understanding, vessels waiting to be filled by US material culture' (p. 29). Robins further states that the media portrayed the refugees as experiencing a 'conversion to the bounty of US material culture' (p. 43). Though this study is an important first step, it is limited in two ways. First, Robins examined only one particular refugee population, the Sudanese 'Lost Boys.' Additional research must be done to determine whether these depictions are consistent across human interest

stories about a variety of refugees. Second, because of her particular population, Robins only found 28 stories to analyse (of which 24 were human interest stories) from the three years preceding her study (which was conducted in 2001). Thus, with only 24 human interest stories gathered from 1999–2001, Robins' sample is relatively small. This study attempts to continue Robins' work by drawing from a wider range of articles about a more diverse population of refugees in order to understand how human interest media frames portray refugees, in general. This leads to the research question: How are refugees portrayed in American newspaper human interest stories?

Method

Data Collection

The texts covered in this study were identified by doing a search on Lexis Nexis's 'Major US Newspaper' Database over the last six months (which at the time of this paper's initial writing was September 17 2008 to March 17 2009). In an effort to capture articles about refugees who had resettled in the US, search terms included (refugee OR refugees) AND (settle OR resettle) AND (United States OR America). This generated an initial list of 236 articles over the preceding six months. Of these, editorials, obituaries, book and movie reviews were removed. Then, the remaining articles were repeatedly read and articles were selected if they met Valkenburg *et al.*'s (1999) three criteria for a human interest story: (a) Did the article bring an individual's story to the presentation of an event, issue or problem? (b) Did the article use emotion or emotionalize the news? and (c) Did the article personalize the news? Using these criteria, 54 articles were identified as human interest stories (approximately 23 per cent of the original articles) which resulted in 175 single spaced pages of text.

Data Analysis

Hall (1975) argues that to understand the ways in which news coverage shapes public opinion and social policy, scholars must move beyond the manifest content of news articles to the 'latent, implicit patterns and emphases' of content (p. 16). To do so, Hall suggests analysts engage in a 'long preliminary soak, a submission by the analyst to the mass of his material' which results in the analyst hearing 'the same underlying appeals, the same 'notes' being sounded again and again in different passages and contexts' (p. 15). In order to engage in such a 'soak', I followed the method outlined by Yin (2007), which combines critical discourse analysis and narrative analysis, to explore the ideological discursive structures constructed by the human interest frames in the major newspapers. First, the articles were repeatedly read to deepen my understanding of the overall narrative through which the refugees were described. Second, themes in the news discourse were identified. Consistent with Yin's definition, themes were taken to be the recurring elements of the news

discourses. Because they are repeated to the extent that they will leave an impression on the reader, themes can be identified through repeated close readings of the newspaper articles. Once the themes that were prevalent in the articles were identified, the meanings were analysed to examine how the various themes construct ideologies through various implications of the discourse.

Results

The question guiding this analysis was: How are refugees portrayed in American newspaper human interest stories? After repeated readings of the news transcripts, three themes were identified: (a) refugees as prior victims; (b) refugees in search of the American Dream; and (c) refugees as unable to achieve the American Dream. Together these discourses represent a narrative of escape, hope, and harsh reality for refugees in America's current economic climate.

Refugees as Prior Victims

Initially, these human interest stories present some support for Phillips and Hardy's (1997) findings that refugees are presented both as frauds and as deserving victims in the media. However, in these human interest stories, the victim story clearly dominates as the preferred narrative for refugees settling in the US.

Frauds – Consistent with Pickering (2001)'s description of the depictions of refugees in the Australian media as both a problematic and a deviant population, one of the 54 articles crafted a description of refugees as a potentially perilous addition to local communities. First, the refugees were presented as a national security concern through potential links to radical terrorist groups. Young Somali refugees were described as targets for terrorist recruitment, as the paper reported 'assertions before a Senate panel Wednesday that a radical Islamic group linked to Al Qaeda might be recruiting youths in Boston to fight in Somalia' (Sacchetti 2009). Beyond this alleged national security threat, the article also reported that refugees are seen as problematic burdens by some of the cities which must take them in, explaining:

In 2002, the Holyoke City Council voted to oppose a plan to resettle Somali refugees there, contending the city could not afford the burden on schools and other services. That same year, the mayor of Lewiston, Maine, urged Somali refugees to stop coming to his city because he said they were a drain on services (Sacchetti 2009: B1).

While this article clearly crafts a possible deviant identity for refugees, it immediately refutes such constructions. In the next sentence, the article continues,

But in recent years, like other immigrant groups, Somalis... are increasingly US citizens who are concerned as much with homeownership, getting into public office, and jury duty as with their families back home (*ibid.*).

As the article continues, it quells the fears of terrorism and disruption by focusing on the stories of particular Somali migrants who articulate horror at the possibility that Somalis would be involved in terrorism and who boast of the economic successes of refugees in the Boston area.

Victims – The remaining 53 human interest articles avoid the possible deviant identity entirely, adopting instead the victim narrative described by Gale (2004). Individual refugees and their families are humanized and made sympathetic through their harrowing stories of victimization. Initially, many stories described refugees and their families as receiving threats of death or attempts on their lives which prompted their choice to escape their country. For example, Iraqi refugee Dawod received a death threat for working for the American occupation in Iraq which read ‘Killing you does not cost us anything’ (Olson 2009). Further, Jim Carney, a member of a refugee-aid non-profit group, described refugees as ‘always on the run and hunted down like animals—they’ve really suffered’ (de Leon 2008). This sense of narrow escape by the refugees profiled permeates many of the human interest articles.

In addition to threats and narrow escapes, the human interest stories repeatedly describe refugees as suffering violence, torture or physical abuse for their political, ethnic, or religious positions in their home country. Redd, a newspaper journalist and Liberian refugee, was described as ‘seized and beaten by apparent [Liberian President] Taylor supporters for having probed the brutal killing of political opposition leader Samuel Dokie’ (Burress 2008). Similarly, Norma Hincapie, a Colombian refugee, was described as forced into hiding by ‘Colombian rebels who had tried to kill her husband, an engineer and “military objective” of guerrillas’ and as living a ‘toxic trauma story [on] her journey from persecution to deliverance’ (Marbin Miller 2009). Many of the human interest stories focused on the political persecution of the individual refugees whose lives they described.

The most prominent lens through which refugees’ status as victims is built, however, is death. Nearly all of the human interest stories described deaths suffered by close family members or friends of the refugees whose stories they told. For example, Ajak, a Sudanese refugee, was described as ‘just 5 years old when his village was attacked and his parents were killed’ (Shah 2008). Similarly, another account described how Salah Saour, a refugee from Baghdad, ‘made a slashing gesture across his neck to show how two of his cousins were killed by extremists’ (Sanchez 2009). Through these and many other similar examples, refugees were presented as the survivors of thousands of murderous attacks. Additionally, while refugees are rarely, except in the one article mentioned above, presented as terrorists themselves, they are often shown suffering violence at the hands of terrorists. Hamid al-Dulayme, another Iraqi refugee, is described as having come ‘to Damascus after the deaths of three brothers—one, he says, killed by the Mahdi Army, one by the Badr Brigade and one by al-Qaida’ (Brown 2008). Thus, as victims of terrorism themselves, the refugees are painted as sympathetic figures for the American audience which receives them.

Refugees in Search of the American Dream

While refugees are overwhelmingly described through these human interest accounts as victims in their former lives abroad, the depictions do not end as they reach the American shores. Instead, refugees are described as actively searching for a better life in the US, as fostering 'the hope of obtaining the American Dream' (Lyon 2008). Though the 'American Dream' concept itself has been defined in a multitude of ways, DeSantis (1998) synthesizes those conceptualizations and suggests that all the conceptualizations share a basic framework in which the American Dream is a mythic story which posits that 'with effort, hard work, optimism, and egalitarian cooperation, *anyone* in America can morally achieve material success [emphasis original]' (p. 480). In the human interest stories I analysed, refugees describe actively seeking two components of the American Dream: getting an education (especially for their children) and getting a good job to provide for their families.

Getting an Education – Initially, the human interest stories repeatedly describe how refugees seek educational experiences once they arrive in America. Mogtaba, a Sudanese refugee, is described as sitting in his US Citizenship Ceremony, having 'worked and studied full time, a student at Hillsborough Community College with grants and student loans' (Amhrein 2009). Similarly, Hikmat-Mahmood, an Iraqi refugee, 'said she is grateful for the schools here' (Carroll 2009). These discourses highlighting the personal importance of education are reinforced by the nonprofit workers who help the refugees get settled in the US. For instance, Prindle, a US aid worker, describes one of her aid 'triumphs' as 'the refugee who became the first woman in her family to get a driver's license and go to college' (Minor 2009). As a result, education for the refugees themselves is positioned as an important component of the American Dream.

Furthermore, education is positioned in these human interest stories as especially critical for the children of refugees. In this sense, education serves to integrate refugee children into the US and allows them to achieve a better life. Dulayme, an Iraqi refugee, describes how his 'life was broken' when violence forced his children out of school in Iraq, saying, 'A human being without education is like an animal' (Brown 2008). In contrast, Husham Shamar, the 17 year old son of Darwish, an Iraqi refugee, is described positively for his desire 'to stay [in the US] and finish high school, attend college and become a doctor' (Lyon 2008). Redd, a Liberian refugee, summarizes education's connection to the promise of the American Dream, saying 'I strongly feel the importance of the educational opportunity, the career opportunity and living in a place where you can be what you want to be if you put your mind to it' (Burress 2008). Therefore, educational possibility, for themselves or for their children, plays an important role in the stories of refugee success in the US.

Getting a Good Job – In addition to getting an education, the true promise of America, as it is described in these human interest stories, is that anyone can get a good job and provide a comfortable lifestyle for their family. Emil Adam, an Iraqi war refugee, described his thoughts when he learned he would be resetting in the US as, ‘I am going to the US, the master of the world. I will get a job’ (Ashton 2009a). Similarly, Saungam Touch, a Cambodian refugee, explained the reasons she had relocated her family to the US by saying, ‘We are here trying to better ourselves so we can get jobs and give back’ (Nankin 2009). Like the stories of education listed above, parents also reported the possibility of getting a good job as particularly important for their children. Shamon and Dawod, two Iraqi refugees, were described as having ‘dreams of college and good jobs for their children, who range in age from 9 to 21’ (Olson 2009). Though good jobs are rarely specifically defined, a human interest story about Kamil, an Iraqi refugee, provides a sense that good jobs are those that allow for families to live in relative material comfort in the US. In his story, Kamil is described as knowing that ‘he needs to find a job, and soon, to provide the furniture, car and other items needed for a stable life’ (Watanabe 2008). Thus, the good job completes the promise of education by allowing refugees to ‘morally achieve material success’ (DeSantis 1998).

For some refugees, the ability to receive an education in the US does result in the good job and the American Dream. Tan Ly, who fled Vietnam in 1979 at the age of 19, now works as ‘a chief engineer at Hill Air Force Base’ and is described in his story as a refugee ‘who, by all measures, has achieved the American dream’ (Moulton 2008). However, despite the ardent desire for good education and good work, Ly’s story is an anomaly. Refugees may be victims who dream of a good life in the US, but these human interest stories nearly always conclude with the impossibility of that dream for most of the refugees who migrate to the US.

Refugees as Unable to Achieve the American Dream

While these human interest stories continuously depicted refugees as individuals in search of the American Dream, the stories simultaneously describe how these same refugees ‘fail to attain even a shadow of the American dream [sic]’ (Moulton 2008). The refugees whose stories are told in these articles are almost universally shown either as unable to find work at all, or as forced to work significantly downward from their previous educational and career experience.

Unable to Find Work – The American economy officially entered its seventeenth month of economic recession in April 2009 (*Wall Street Journal* 2009), which means the six months of news coverage selected for this analysis began a year into a serious economic downturn. By April 2009, America’s general unemployment rate hit a 25 year high of 8.5 per cent (Tackett

2009). The refugees described in these articles were often positioned as victims of these overall economic trends. For example, Carroll (2009) explained,

Refugees are finding it tough to land a job as Houston's economy slows ... Next month, Hikmat-Mahmood's [Iraqi refugee] family will reach the end of their rental assistance, and they still have no job prospects.

In this case, the poor economic climate in Houston is positioned as the cause of Hikmat-Mahmood's economic woes. Similarly, Wright (2009) explains:

The economic slowdown also has become an added burden for many refugees who can't find a job to support themselves. Smith Jean Baptiste [a Haitian refugee] ... has been here about four years and has worked as a driver for a rental car company and a newspaper deliveryman. 'It's very tough now,' said Jean Baptiste 'I'll take anything.'

Not only are refugees having more trouble finding jobs at all, as Baptiste's story hints, refugees are having more trouble keeping jobs once they are obtained. Travers, a workforce development director at a nonprofit agency helping refugees, explains that her agency is seeing refugee clients 'who have been laid off—even clients we had just recently placed, clients who had not been easy to find jobs for in the first place' (Nankin 2009). Thus, like many other Americans struggling to get and keep work in a recession, refugees are positioned as vulnerable to the volatile American employment market.

As jobs become more difficult to find and keep, refugees are depicted as increasingly disillusioned and frustrated with life in the US. One story explains that for Tarek Darwish, an Iraqi refugee, 'life in Utah has been a list of disappointments. His family of seven lives in a two-bedroom apartment. None of the adults have jobs' (Lyon 2009). Like Utah, California has failed to be the site of the promised American Dream. As one account explains,

after nearly nine months in the United States, Iraqi refugee Nada Naji and five of her adult children are jobless, frustrated and worried about being evicted from their Moreno Valley rental home (Olson 2009).

The frustrations culminate, for some refugees, in a desire to return to their home nations. For instance, Nada Shammar, an Iraqi refugee, 'has been looking for a job since she arrived in August and wants to go back to the Middle East' (Lyon 2009). Thus, the desired American Dream seems to be presented as unattainable for many refugees, especially in light of the American economy's overall ill health.

Working Down — Those refugees who can find jobs, moreover, often are described as being forced to accept work below their previous educational and career experiences. For instance, Marshall (2009) describes Herlly Camacho, a refugee from Colombia, who 'parked cars for a valet service and served cocktails at a Miami Beach disco. Those jobs were an odd fit, considering her training. She's a surgeon.' Professional credentials, like those for

doctors like Camacho, are routinely described as very difficult or impossible to transfer into the US. Silvana, a 26-year-old Iraqi refugee, is described as having similar concerns. Though she finished her education as a civil engineer in Baghdad in 2005, 'she doesn't know where to start now that she's in the United States. It's possible that she can work for a licensed engineer and apply for her own credentials at a later date' (Ashton 2009b). Adam, Silvana's father who worked as a doctor in Iraq, summarizes the sense of frustration many refugees shared after having to accept jobs below their typical experience, saying, 'I have been practising as a doctor for the last 27 years, and now I am out of a job' (Ashton 2009b).

Thus, while refugees are presented in the human interest stories as victims turning to new hope and new life in the US, the reality that meets them is far from hope-filled. Rather, these human interest stories almost universally paint a picture of a difficult and frustrating life for refugees in the US with few, if any, opportunities for economic advancement.

Discussion

As Hardy *et al.* (2001) argue, refugee status is discursively constructed in the interaction between media, migrants, government agencies, non-governmental organizations and host communities. The findings of this study show that through human interest stories refugees are portrayed as victims of prior violence and abuse who arrive in America in search of the education and jobs promised by the myth of the American Dream. However, the human interest stories also depict refugees as current victims of the American economic crisis, deeply frustrated by their inability to achieve the American Dream. Together these discourses represent a narrative of escape, hope, and then harsh reality for refugees in America's current economic climate. This creates implications both for how refugees and their roles are defined in American society and for the ways in which public discourses shape appropriate policy responses to refugee resettlement.

First, though refugees may regularly be described negatively (as frauds, burdens, possible threats) and positively (as victims in need of protection) in the media (Phillips and Hardy 1997; Gale 2004; Hardy and Phillips 1999; Pickering 2001), from this analysis it becomes clear that the human interest frame privileges the victim portrayal. Human interest stories, by their very nature, frame the news in a way that focuses on how issues affect particular people. Furthermore, the goal of human interest stories is to personalize and emotionalize an event, issue or problem by helping the audience personally connect to an individual or individuals who represent the issue (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). Though refugees may be characterized as frauds, burdens or threats at times, it would be more difficult to present a fraud in a way which personally resonates with the audience. As a result, a preference for portraying individual refugees as victims needing protection and aid seems designed to allow readers to develop a positive emotional connection to the story.

However, though at face value preferable to a fraud depiction, the victim characterization is not unproblematic for the refugees it characterizes. Kapur (2002) argues that while the victim subject is a transnational phenomenon (victims in popular discourse are depicted as being both from the West and from the non-West), 'the Third World victim subject has come to represent the more victimized subject; that is, the real or authentic victim subject' (p. 2). As Kapur explains, that 'look of starvation, helplessness, and victimization' of Third World subjects often present in public discourse 'is remarkably familiar to our imaginations, irrespective of the reality' (p. 2). When news accounts like those of refugee resettlement perpetuate the stereotype of Third World citizens as victim subjects, two harms inevitably arise. First, Kapur explains that such portrayals of victim subjects encourage cultural essentialism. Refugees are portrayed as victims of their culture, which 'reinforces stereotyped and racist representations of their culture and privileges the culture of the West' (p. 6). Thus refugees are characterized only by the horrors of the national or international conflicts which they fled, not by the strong religious, cultural or national traditions of the lands from which they came. This perpetuates a sense of American superiority and refugee cultural inferiority, even in these seemingly positive depictions of refugees.

Furthermore, at a policy level, Kapur (2002) cautions that the victim subject portrayal of Third World citizens invites protectionist remedies and responses that are not necessarily in the victims' interests (including paternalist, protectionist measures or rights restrictions for the victim's 'benefit'). This means that a victim framing may encourage American policy decisions which control refugee resettlement (where they choose to settle, which programmes they must enrol in, etc.) in a way that strips refugees of agency and hinders refugee empowerment.

Second, Robins' (2003) study of American newspapers' coverage of the Sudanese 'Lost Boys' who had resettled in the US found that refugees were presented as empty vessels, waiting to be filled with American material culture. This sample of human interest stories, however, positioned refugees as agents rather than vessels, describing them as individuals actively seeking the educational credentials and good jobs inherent in the American Dream. Despite this focus on refugees as agents, however, the American Dream still retains part of its materialist focus in these human interest stories. Ewen (2001) argues that the rise of mass production in America created a demand for a consumerist lifestyle. Essentially, for mass production to work, consumers had to be available to buy the goods. Ewen argues that one of the ways advertisers were able to craft a culture of consumption in the US was by rhetorically redefining traditional values. In a world of consumption, freedom came to mean the freedom to buy the goods you choose and equality came to mean an equal ability to affect the market through purchases. Ewen argues that immigration, specifically, is affected by these

discourses. In a consumerist US, the way to become an American (to live in the land of the free) is defined through the right to consume. These discourses of Americanism as consumption are evident in the human interest stories' construction of the refugees' American Dream. For many of the refugees, the freedom to live in the US was the freedom to get good jobs and obtain 'the basics of American life, such as buying car insurance' (Ash-ton 2009a). Thus, though these articles present refugees as agents, their ultimate goal seems to be the same American material wealth which Robins' (2003) analysis found.

The danger, of course, is that the American Dream may not be reachable by many Americans, including the refugees who have recently resettled in the US. Yet even as these articles blame structural causes for this failure (refugees cannot achieve the American Dream due to the recession or due to lack of government intervention), none of the articles question the underlying materialist assumptions of the American Dream (e.g. by arguing that there are dreams more worthy than car insurance). Thus, while structural factors may be blamed for the failure of refugees to attain the American Dream, the very materialist assumptions of the dream cast refugees as consumers who are not fully American if they cannot consume their way to the idealized American lifestyle. This reinforces Robins' (2003) critique of the depictions of refugees as vessels waiting to be filled with material goods.

Finally, the refugee human interest stories are almost entirely episodic in their construction—focusing on individuals or families in the form of case studies. However, despite Iyengar's (1999) findings, these episodic human interest stories place responsibility for the economic struggles of refugees equally on individual migrants and on structural, institutional factors. Initially, the difficulty refugees experienced finding and retaining jobs was often blamed on individual factors, including lack of English fluency, lack of requisite job skills and lack of cultural knowledge. For example, Hardin (2009) reported that

long-established workers are being laid off or seeing their hours cut. In that environment, finding work for someone who might not speak English and might not have certain skills can be difficult.

Similarly, de Leon (2008) explained,

Because of the economy and the fact that they're still learning English and acclimatizing to the culture, many KaRen [refugees] have a tough time getting hired for full-time employment in Spokane.

In this sense, those who don't speak English and are unfamiliar with the culture are blamed for their inability to find work (East 2009). This individual attribution is consistent with Iyengar's (1999) predictions for the episodic frame.

However, an equal number of articles attributed the refugees' difficulty to structural and institutional factors, including the American economic crisis

and the lack of sufficient state aid for refugees. When describing why refugees could not find jobs, the American economic crisis was often blamed. Oleg Jolick, refugee resettlement director for the Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Galveston-Houston, summarizes the sentiment, saying 'We are feeling the consequences of the downturn in the economy, like everyone else is' (Carroll 2009).

Though the economy plays a role, the state is blamed as well. Carrie Pender, a refugee specialist at a Utah school district, explains 'These people that have already suffered their whole lives are coming to America and are still suffering because they're not being properly taken care of' (Lyon 2008). Federal and state agencies are criticized for not updating their aid packages for refugees, in part because 'adjusted for inflation, the aid to refugees is less than the amount provided to Southeast Asian refugees decades ago' (Lyon 2009). Moreover, even when they do get sufficient aid, 'refugees receive most government aid for only eight months' (Olson 2009) which many articles argue is not enough time to find a job in this market. In this sense, the human interest stories are also offering a more thematic look at the problems faced by refugees in the context of an episodic case study.

This combination of episodic problems with both individualistic and thematic social causes may also be a function of the economic recession occurring at the time of this news analysis. As thousands of Americans are out of work, it may be more difficult to position refugees without jobs as uniquely responsible for their plight. However, this blame on the economic recession may be short-lived. Whether putting the blame on institutional factors persists as the economy improves is an important area for future research.

The implications of this study are bounded both by the selection of news coverage and the temporal bounds in which it occurred. First, the news coverage for this study came from Lexis-Nexis' database of 'Major US Newspapers.' Depictions of refugees in human interest stories could be altered by their location in minor regional newspapers or non-American newspapers. Furthermore, the visual depictions possible on television could mean that televised human interest stories would present additional themes. Future research should continue to explore how refugees are framed by human interest stories in these alternative contexts. Second, this analysis is bounded temporally by the choice to use the six months from September 2008 to March 2009 as the time frame for data collection. All six of these months were characterized by economic instability and recession in the US, which clearly permeated many of the stories regarding refugees. If this analysis were repeated in an economic 'boom' time, the depictions of refugees would very likely be different. Thus, this study should be repeated over multiple economic as well as spatial and media contexts to ensure a robust understanding of human interest coverage of refugees. By continuing scholarship along these lines, researchers should be better able to understand how refugees are discursively constructed in the interaction between media accounts, migrants, government agencies, non-governmental organizations and host communities.

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