(Inter)disciplinary Research and Practice with Refugees Resettling in Europe: The Need for a 'Phronetic' Social Science

Maria Psoinos

St George's, University of London and Kingston University, UK

0072

The European Conference on the Social Sciences 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

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Introduction

The resettlement and adaptation of refugee populations is an important issue which has been extensively researched and is still very much prominent on the social sciences agenda. This is not surprising when taking into account that by the end of 2011, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) the global number of refugees was approximately 10.4 million (UNHCR 2011).

In many European countries, for example the UK, the poor quality of migration and ethnicity data does not enable an accurate estimate of the numbers, ethnicities and statuses of migrants and refugees living in the country (Phillimore 2011). Nevertheless, in Europe we are looking at a more-or-less steady population of more than 1.5 million people (UNHCR 2011). The significant size of this population means this is not a topic which social scientists can afford to leave under-researched.

Moreover refugee populations are consistently found to be fraught with several post-migration adverse experiences, such as unemployment, professional de-skilling, socioeconomic vulnerability, poor accommodation, barriers to healthcare, experienced discrimination and racism, and social isolation (Hack-Polay 2008; Sales 2002; Vallely, Scott & Hallums 1999). Therefore it is imperative to keep on researching and suggesting solutions on how this population's psychological and social well-being can be improved (Murray, Davidson & Schweitzer 2010).

Undoubtedly refugee resettlement and adaptation is a complex issue which calls for ongoing interdisciplinary research and practice. Indeed, psychologists, sociologists, social workers, political scientists and anthropologists have all been contributing theoretically and/or practically to this field for the past three decades (Gonsalves 1992; Ingleby 2005). Yet when looking closely at the relevant available literature the following dualism emerges: on the one hand, there is material concerning theoretical *know why* (such as sociological and psychological studies, which theorise why the majority of refugees experience post-migration adversity); on the other hand there is material focusing on technical *know how* (such as studies from the fields of social work, clinical psychology and healthcare, which explore the most efficient psychosocial interventions for different groups of refugees).

This paper first draws on a systematic literature search and a narrative review, which were carried out in the area of refugee resettlement and adaptation in Europe and then argues against this polarity existing between the various disciplines contributing to this field. It endorses an emphasis not on theoretical or technical knowledge but on practical ethics and suggests a 'prudent' or 'phronetic'- according to Aristotle- (Flyvbjerg 2001: 56; Flyvbjerg, Landman & Schram 2012) turn in research and practice, so that refugee peoples and sending and receiving societies benefit the most. In the following pages, the terms 'refugee', 'adaptation' and also 'phronetic social science' are further described.

Who is 'really' a refugee?

The legal connotation of the term 'refugee' applies to persons who have fled to another country and asked for asylum on the grounds of a 'well-founded fear of being

persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion' (International Refugee Convention, 1951, article 1A.2).

The above legal definition of refugee is quite limited and over the years it has become increasingly difficult to show clearly 'genuine' refugees as distinct to migrants, because reasons for migration are often intertwined. However, a distinction is frequently drawn between these two populations, in terms of their motivation, that is, the movement of migrants unlike refugees is triggered by economic push or pull factors. Although their movement may not be absolutely voluntary migrants are more likely to be able to choose their destinations and can go home without fear of persecution (Bhugra & Jones 2001).

The term 'refugee' is often used in two different senses. Sometimes it includes all displaced persons who have applied for asylum, regardless of the outcome of their application. On other occasions it refers to those who have been granted refugee status under the UN Convention only (Rosenkranz 2000). It is important to keep in mind that the use of specific definitions entails a danger of conceptualising and consequently treating refugees as a homogeneous group of people, as if they belonged to a clearly defined category (Papadopoulos 2007). Admittedly such a categorisation is potentially labelling these people, yet in this paper -for practical reasons- refugees shall be defined according to the second description.

Adaptation as a dynamic process not a final state

Berry (1990, 1997) maintained that there are four possible outcomes to migrants' and refugees' acculturation (process of transition) including marginalisation, separation, assimilation and integration which depend upon two factors: individuals' desire to maintain their heritage culture; and their interest in positive contact with others, although these are often impeded by societal factors (Papadopoulos et al 2004).

Berry's approach has been undoubtedly important because it highlighted that acculturation proceeds in diverse ways and that it is not necessary for migrants and refugees to give up their culture of origin in order to adapt to the new society (Phinney et al 2001).

Yet nowadays, there is some valid critique addressed to Berry's model: critics raise the point that so far adaptation has been conceptualised as a linear process, supposedly advantageous for everyone at the same time and that a more complex and globalised form of adaptation is relevant to today's transnational societies (Murphy 2006; Rudmin 2003). 'Transnationalism' is defined as constant communication developed and sustained by migrants who build extensive networks linking the new country and the country of origin (Foroun & Glick Schiller 2001). And indeed, it is an integral feature in the lives of migrants and refugees in Europe today because constant communication is facilitated by information and communication technologies (Williams, 2006). Transnationalism offers 'different vantage points for social comparisons between and within social, cultural and ethnic groups' (Mahalingam 2006: 9). So nowadays, there is broad consensus on the multilevel, dynamic and value-dependent qualities of migrant well-being: 'multilevel and dynamic because risk and protective factors constantly interact at various levels, from the individual, to

the community, to the social-level; and value-dependent because it is conditioned by the host society's norms of justice' (Prilleltensky 2008: 359).

Therefore in this paper refugees' adaptation to the host society is regarded as a dynamic, multifaceted process and not as a final psychosocial state these populations are aiming at.

Phronesis in social sciences

Aristotle, as one of the forefathers of modern science along with Socrates and Plato, when discussing intellectual work distinguished between about e*pisteme*, *techne* and *phronesis*. *Episteme* is generally translated as 'science' and concerns the production of knowledge which is invariable in time and space, and which is attained via analytical rationality. *Episteme* resembles our ideal modern scientific project, as expressed in natural sciences, while *techne* is regarded as 'art' in the sense of 'craft' and its objective is the application of technical knowledge according to a pragmatic instrumental rationality. Whereas 'episteme concerns theoretical *know why* and techne is all about technical *know how*, phronesis emphasizes practical knowledge and practical ethics' (Flyvbjerg 2001: 56). Phronesis is often translated as 'prudence' or 'practical wisdom''. This means that *phronesis* first focuses on the analysis of values- what is good or bad for man- and then sets off for action. This distinguishes it from *episteme* which is invariable and context-independent and from *techne* which is oriented towards production. *Phronesis* is variable and context-specific and oriented towards action.

Flyvbjerg in his book 'Making social science matter' supports that despite their importance, the qualities of the concrete, the practical and the ethical have been neglected by today's science (2001: 59). He argues that social sciences can be particularly strong- when compared to natural sciences- in their role as *phronesis*. Therefore there is a clear call for a 'phronetic social science', which recognises that social scientific knowledge is neither context-free nor has cumulative and predictive value. It does not seek to construct general cause law-like statements but instead critically assesses values, norms and structures of power and domination in specific contexts of the social world (Clegg & Pitsis 2012: 73).

A phronetic social science consciously tries to answer the following questions Flyvbjerg originally proposed in his aforementioned book: 1) where are we going?, 2) who gains and who loses, by which mechanisms of power?, 3) is it desirable?, and 4) what should be done? This means that this kind of social science focuses on values, the authors get close to the people and phenomena they study, they use extensively case studies in context, and their work promotes communication between researchers, participants and the community or society at large. The point of a phronetic study is to encourage dialogue with individuals and society and to assist them- after they have assisted the researchers- in reflecting on their values. The aim is to make moral debate part of public life and in this way initiate social change (Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 63).

This paper points out the need for a phronetic approach in refugee social research and practice. This means paying attention to particular contexts and the values and power-relations embedded in these contexts, discussing them and then taking appropriate action so that the people being studied benefit the most. Indeed, after problematisation

and critique comes constructive action (Flyvbjerg 2012, p. 109), therefore once these values and power-issues have been reflected upon, then phronetic social scientists can proceed to bringing changes to improve refugees' well-being.

Methodology

Before presenting the methodology adopted in this paper, it is pertinent to distinguish between a systematic review and a narrative review:

A systematic review is a specific methodology that locates existing studies, selects and evaluates contributions, analyses and synthesises data, and reports the evidence in such a way that allows the reader to reach clear conclusions about what is and is not known. This is not a literature review in the traditional sense, but a research project in itself that explores a clearly specified question, using existing studies. The researcher must set prespecified relevance and quality criteria for the selection/inclusion of studies and to make such criteria transparent to readers. Extensive searches are carried out in order to incorporate both published and unpublished studies. In terms of outcomes, the systematic review must provide solid evidence of 'what is out there' and make relevant suggestions for future research (Denyer & Tranfield 2011). In summary, the main features of a systematic review are that it is comprehensive in its coverage of the literature; very cautious to the quality of included evidence; unbiased and transparent; and replicable.

At the same time, there is the narrative review, which is related to certain methodological approaches in the social sciences such as interpretative review, thematic analysis, meta-narrative mapping (Mays, Pope & Popay 2005a) and critical interpretive synthesis (Dixon-Woods et al 2006). Narrative reviews are typically concerned with questions such as 'What do we know about the causes of a particular social and/or health problem?' 'What are the implications of evidence on causality for the type of interventions that should be developed?' (Mays, Pope & Popay 2005b). Narrative reviews see the thematic boundaries in a research field as more diffuse, as potentially overlapping with other fields and as shifting as the review progresses (Dixon-Woods et al 2006).

In this paper the narrative review approach is adopted, which means there is less emphasis on assessing the quality of available evidence, and a focus instead on exploring the above two questions and ultimately supporting empirically the paper's main argument, that is, that there is a lack of 'phronesis' in the available research literature on refugees' resettlement and adaptation in Europe. So a narrative review is as comprehensive as possible; clear about the inclusion criteria it used; not 'unbiased' since there is a specific argument to be supported; not replicable but transferable to similar and different research contexts.

Searching for articles

A literature search on the topic of refugee resettlement and adaptation in Europe was undertaken in May and June 2013 of the following databases: ASSIA (Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts), Social Care Online-SCIE's resources and publications, PsycINFO (Psychological Information Database), MEDLINE (Medical Literature

Analysis and Retrieval System Online), CINAHL (Cumulative index of nursing and allied health literature), Social Work Abstracts, Social Sciences Abstracts.

In addition, extensive search was carried out within the following journals: Journal of Refugee Studies; Migration Studies; Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies; International Migration; Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies; Journal of International Migration and Integration; Migration Letters.

The general search strategy combined index terms and freetext terms on the concepts of **population** (refugees, displaced persons), **states (**such as socio-economic vulnerability, acculturative stress), and **outcomes** such as psychosocial adaptation.

More specifically, the following inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied:

Inclusion: articles written in English, which were published between January 2003-April 2013, and focused on theory and research on refugee resettlement and adaptation in Europe.

Exclusion: articles where the research population (refugees, immigrants, asylum-seekers) could not be clearly identified; articles where the research focus was on highlighting methodological and/or ethics-related issues.

The initial search output consisted of approximately 400 bibliographic references, most of which had abstracts. Continuous screening was performed on the search output titles and abstracts in order to select the most relevant resources.

The emerging material can be roughly divided into the following two areas:

1) Theory-focused work which describes and attempts to explain why most refugees experience post-migration stress and subsequent disadvantage (Alcock 2003; Bhui et al 2003; Bloch, 2004; Bogic et al 2003; Carswell, Blackburn & Barker 2011; Cohn et al 2006; Daley 2009; Ghazinour, Richter & Eisemann 2003; Gebrehiwot et al 2004; Herlihy & Turner 2007; Hermansson, Timpka & Nyce 2003; Kelly 2003; Turner et al 2003; Voulgaridou, Papadopoulos & Tomaras 2006). In this field there is also recent literature exploring how and why some refugees cope well with experienced post-migration adversity (Guribye, Sandal & Oppedal 2011; Korac 2003; Papadopoulos 2007). The majority of the studies included in this area come from the disciplines of sociology and psychology.

2) Studies mainly from the fields of social work, clinical psychology and healthcare, which assess a range of psychosocial and/or health-related interventions for refugees and make suggestions for future policy and practice (Carlsson, Mortensen & Kastrup 2006; Hastings 2012; Hek 2005; Ingleby & Watters 2005; Ingram 2009; Palic & Elklit 2011; Persson & Gard 2013; Zepinic, Bogic & Priebe 2012).

Further screening was performed on the selected articles for identifying any existing aspects of ‘phronesis’. As already mentioned, the four phronetic key questions according to Flyvbjerg (2001) address: 1) where are we going?, 2) who gains and who loses, by which mechanisms of power?, 3) is it desirable?, and 4) what should be done? These queries provided a useful guide when searching for the most ‘phronetic’ resources.

The second question is particularly important; social science so far has not adequately incorporated issues of power (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 64) and it emerges from the literature search that this has also been the case with refugee-related social research and practice.

Presenting articles which address 'phronetic' issues

There are only few exceptions of studies carried out with refugees in Europe (Daley 2006; Hardi 2005; Psoinos (2007, 2011); Williams 2006) which discuss some of the above phronetic issues. It is worth noting that in some cases there is reflection not necessarily on how these can be overcome -because conflicting interests and boundaries sometimes cannot be crossed (Doná 2007; Shdaimah & Stahl 2012)- but on how, via active engagement with conflict, better solutions can emerge.

Here is an example from a selected research study:

Psoinos (2007, 2011) while exploring the psychosocial well-being of highly educated refugees in the UK identified some of the ways in which various agents in the community influenced how the participants' shaped their perceptions of post-migration life:

> *There appeared to be two types of interaction between the participants and the local organisations they visited and consequently two ways in which these seemed to shape the way the participants formed their perceptions. Some interviewees acknowledged the help they received and approved of these organisations. The following quote of a participant who presented a Narrative of Hope clearly shows how community- workers contributed to this shaping of their perceptions:*
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> *"After my second year in the U.K. I found out that you can ask for medical help, information and stuff from local centers and organisations. I was initially cautious because the Home Office expect you to take care of yourself, to sustain yourself. So I was hesitant…then I found out about a local community that helped refugees…It's good to know they are there, it makes you feel you are not totally on your own at the end of the day" (male, engineer, African)*
>
> *But some other participants did not regard local organisations in a positive way and disapproved of the way they negatively predispose their clients. The following extract from a Narrative of Disappointment suggests that the way one employment agency approached the participant formed his expectations about how life in the UK would be:*
>
> *"...the Job Center was another experience, which was not very nice. I filled in all the forms, there are lots of questions about what you did in the past, what you can do and what sort of jobs you are looking for. And obviously I did not speak the language but I was a graduate so I had different work experience before I came here… And the advisor, because I did not speak the language, said that there was no way I am*

going to find a job I wanted or that I did in the past, I don't think she was in a position of saying this but she did. She said the only option available was to do washing-up in cafes and restaurants...That was really difficult. At the moment I study English, trying to improve. But I know now that because of the language and coming from another country has made it harder to do what we want to do" (male, graduate in political sciences, Middle Eastern)

After reflecting on the above ways through which different actors shaped refugees' perceptions, it was possible to make suggestions for improving dialogue between refugees and local organisations. For example, refugee agencies need to facilitate as much as possible the process of certifying refugees' formal knowledge and then ensure that the latter is updated through specialized programmes. In addition, the effects of such programmes on the beneficiaries' progress should be followed up and if necessary, reformulated in the course of time, if refugees' adaptation in the host society and actual development is to be attained.

Williams (2006, p. 867) explored the social networks of refugees in the UK and in particular the role of networks in maximising the potential of refugees' tactical actions within the dominant system. Based on the narratives and experiences of refugees she describes some of the ways in which social networks were formed and then reshaped depending on people's personality, history and circumstances. In the following extract from the article, the author discusses not only power issues emerging among research participants, but also how she had to reassess her initial assumptions about the research topic, therefore critically reflecting on her own power stemming from her role as the lead researcher:

An example of how refugees may call on virtual strangers for help came from a participant who was approached by a refugee in the next room of the hostel where they lived. This refugee needed help receiving some money from a relative abroad. The two had previously barely exchanged a word but as the research participant had better Home Office documentation than his neighbour, he was asked to help with a financial transfer. The relatives abroad sent the money in the name of my informant, rather than in the name of the intended recipient, as the latter's ID documentation had been rejected by the brokering agency.
This was clearly taking a risk as when the funds arrived they were in the participant's name and the other refugee had to trust he would not renege on the agreement and try to keep the money. This example illustrates how important even the loosest of acquaintances can be and also how dependent refugees may be on each other.
In this case the refugee who was asking for help was from an African country with very few, if any, of his countrymen living in the locality to call on for help. The research participant, on the other hand, belongs to one of the largest ethnic groups of refugees and has a wide choice of contacts among his own country people and a still wider potential field of contacts as he speaks three Middle Eastern languages (...) Large

> *numbers of compatriots, for this participant, were a clear advantage, but for another (...) these compatriots were potentially dangerous (...) Research thus demonstrated that the different locales of networks observed can be characterised by their functions and by the depth and quality of relationships. This improved understanding of networks led me to re-assess my original classification of networks based on physical location of network members (in the UK, in other countries of resettlement and those remaining in countries of origin) for another based on the functions and styles of networks* (p. 872-873).

Reflecting on the method

Narrative reviews and other similar approaches such as interpretative reviews, thematic analyses, meta-narrative mapping and critical interpretive synthesis often raise questions regarding their validity and credibility (Dixon-Woods et al 2006). Systematic reviews thematically summarise- by adhering to specific inclusion and exclusion criteria and clear procedures- the available evidence of an area and then can be easily reproduced and enriched by other researchers. This kind of replicability or indeed auditability is not a component of a narrative review. Yet in this paper, the lack of phronesis in refugee studies could be highlighted and critically discussed only via a narrative review.

The choice of this method therefore can be defended on the grounds that it was comprehensive as possible; clear about the inclusion criteria it used; admittedly not 'unbiased' but with a specific argument to be supported; not replicable but transferable to similar and different research contexts.

Conclusion: Reflecting on the lack of phronesis in refugee studies

It is beyond the purposes of this paper to examine why so far there is a lack of phronesis in refugee studies. In more specific research areas such as refugee well-being, the intra-individual and pathological focus has been already examined and critically discussed (Papadopoulos 2007; Psoinos 2010) and is attributed to particular factors such as: (a) the change in refugee populations at the end of the 20th century (that is, only in the past 25 years refugee resettlement has involved flows of people of radically different cultural orientations), (b) host governments' health policies targeting diseases that refugees could 'import' and affect the host population, (c) psychological and psychiatric theories one-sidedly linking forced migration with stress and psychopathology respectively, and (d) the media coverage which have been frequently portraying refugees as prone to mental illness.

Yet the issue of phronesis, and why it is missing from refugee studies is more complex to unravel. There are of course the reasons which possibly account for the delay of a phronetic social science approach in general: first, the fact that the latter requires being firm in one's discipline but also being able to work in an interdisciplinary way; and second, that the phronetic call prompts social scientists not only to go beyond their *own* research paradigm, whether that is positivism, constructivism or critical theory (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba 2011) but actually to go beyond *any* traditional research paradigm. If we agree with Flyvbjerg (2006) that in

fact social science is *non-paradigmatic*, then the phronetic call requires from social scientists to re-shift their focus more on politics and power issues embedded in research and practice, and less on carefully set-up research designs and rigorous methodologies. The importance of going *beyond* the established paradigms has been highlighted- especially by critical social research methodologists (Morgan 2007; Patton 2002; Stephenson & Papadopoulos 2006) yet still causes controversy within academic circles.

In addition, in refugee studies, an obviously value-laden research area where refugees themselves, but also researchers, interpreters, collaborators, gate-keepers and advisors are 'vehicles of power in a net-like organization' (Doná 2007) it is difficult to disentangle the underlying 'mechanisms of power' and reveal 'who gains and who loses'.

Nevertheless this paper endorses that a phronetic social science is the most just way of researching *societal* issues and how these affect people's lives (societal here is used 'as shorthand for social, organizational, cultural, structural and politico-discursive arrangements' (Fryer 2003). In the specific field of refugee resettlement and adaptation, it is a research approach particularly timely to adopt, as refugees constitute an integral part of the migrant population in Europe. Finally it is an approach imperative to implement as well, as refugees' well-being has been extensively researched and is by now known to be particularly vulnerable.

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