Richmond and Refugees
The Value of Narratives in the Refugee Resettlement Exchange

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How did I spend my summer?

ReR's Mission

My Role
MISSION STATEMENT

"Helping refugees establish roots, build community, and become self-sufficient."

RESPONSIBILITIES

Refugee Outreach Program Assistant
- Client visits
- DMV advocacy
- Social Services appointments
- Volunteer introductions
Who is a refugee?

"Any person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence, and is unable or unwilling to return to or seek protection of that country due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion."

(Virginia Department of Social Services)

STATISTICS

- 2,137 refugees resettled in Richmond since 2013
- 59% from Afghanistan and Iraq
- Other large populations from Bhutan, DRC, Myanmar

(Virginia Department of Social Services)
RESSETTLEMENT AGENCIES

**Agencies**
- International Rescue Committee
- Church World Service
- Commonwealth Catholic Charities

**Services**
- Federally funded
- Initial move and living expenses
- Support in first few months

REESTABLISH RICHMOND

- Filling resource and time gaps
- Partnering with community
- Visiting refugees in their homes
- Understanding needs from refugees' perspectives
- Building relationships
- Establishing trust
SHARPENING FOCUS

Meaning of refugees' personal stories

- What role do narratives play?
- What do audiences do with these narratives?
- What does this mean in today's political moment?
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Who?
- ReR coworkers
- Resettlement workers
- Volunteers and community members

What?
- Open-ended questions
- Elicit stories
- Individual perspectives

ARGUMENT

“The reception and redeployment of refugee narratives by resettlement workers reveals the moral, motivational, and political value of these narratives within the refugee resettlement exchange.”

THEORY

THEMES

- **Humanitarian discourse** (Malkki, Ticktin)
- **Conceptions of value** (Graeber, Sliwinski)
- Refugees as apolitical, ahistorical, speechless subjects (Malkki 1996)
- Refugees as "bare life" (Agamben, in Holmes and Castañeda 2016)
- Refugees as bringing nothing to the table
- Humanitarianism as a monodirectional flow of value

**HUMANITARIAN DISCOURSE**

- Three types of value (Graeber, in Widlock 2013)
  - "meaningful difference"
  - "willingness to give something up"
  - "desirable and good"
- Capitalism privileges the second
- Biopolitics defines the third
- Narratives fit into the first

**DEFINING VALUE**
"If they were born in a different country, they could be me and I could be them" (Amanda* 2017)

- Act of sharing as a "reward"
- Putting resettlement workers' lives into perspective
- Relationships between resettlement workers and refugees
- "Humanitarianism expresses a moral value" (Sliwinski 2012)

**MORAL VALUE**

*All interviewee names are pseudonyms*

"The most powerful impact of anything that we do" (Anna 2017)

- Informing actions personally and professionally
- Used as proof of success
- Eliciting compassion
- Conceptions of universal humanity (Ticktin 2011)

**MOTIVATIONAL VALUE**
"We need stories to educate the population so that we can fix the problem" (Maya 2017)

- Educating the public
- Relating to others through retelling
- Changing the current political scene
- Questions of deservingness (Holmes and Castañeda 2016)

**POLITICAL VALUE**

Refugee narratives challenge our conceptions of humanitarianism and value.

Moral  
Motivational  
Political
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