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Social work with refugee and displaced populations in Europe: (dis)continuities, dilemmas, developments

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ABSTRACT

Social work with displaced people has an extended background in the history of the profession. Yet, it has taken different forms and remits over time, parallel to the evolving legal and political definition of refugee themselves. Inside Europe, in particular, social work with forced migrants has gained new visibility and increasing complexity after the so-called refugee crisis. Aspects like people's limited visibility and eligibility towards formal welfare services, their uncertain legal status, their temporal "liminality" and their non-linear patterns of mobility have all major consequences for social work practice, research and education. In discussing them, we highlight the need to invest in students' (and practitioners') reflexivity, given both the complexity of building up trust-based relationships with forcibly displaced people, and the risk of cultivating essentialized, stigmatizing or nativist representations about them. In all of these respects, our introduction provides a conceptual basis for this Special Issue of EJSW, and for the broader debate in social work across Europe.

Introduction

Refugee reception and integration has resulted in a highly debated and contentious issue all over Europe, particularly after the so-called crisis in 2015. Social workers, as a part of their institutional and professional mandate, have played a central and mixed role in addressing the needs, rights and claims of asylum seekers, refugees and other displaced persons. Their contribution in civil society organisations and movements has often been as significant as in local authorities and other formal welfare agencies. Yet social work practice with asylum seeker/refugee clients, in all of its forms, is not always so well-reflected as it would need to. While it shares many features and dilemmas with social work with immigrant and ethnic minorities in general, it also has its own peculiarities. These, as we discuss below, have primarily to do with socio-legal liminality, temporal fragmentation and non-linear patterns of mobility.

This Special Issue, initially planned out of the collaborative initiatives of the IMISCOE research group IMASP,[1] testifies to the vitality and complexity of social work with highly mobile and vulnerable clients in Europe. It brings together a set of articles that analyse social work with forcibly displaced people with different empirical focuses and theoretical perspectives. All of them avoid the cognitive trap of taking migrants, or for that matter refugees, as a *given*. In doing so, they contribute to 'de-migranticize' social work with people on the move – i.e. to appreciate the latter as human beings

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with a variety of attributes, whose life trajectories are at constant interplay with those of their native or non-migrant counterparts (Dahinden, 2016).

In what follows we first discuss social work with refugees in the light of insights gained from Refugee Studies and Forced Migration Studies. To some extent, such a connection is already present in international social work. Here, however, we aim to a more extended conversation between these subfields of migration studies and contemporary developments in social work practice, although with a focus only on European experiences. We then discuss the substantive and methodological complexity of social work with forced migrants and high-mobile clients, cutting across ordinary divides such as formal vs. informal, or top-down vs. bottom-up. Last, we outline some emerging challenges and prospects for social work education, research and practice, also in the light of the contributions to this Special Issue.

Social work with asylum seekers and refugees: a state of the art

Social work with mobile populations has been at the core of the profession since its very beginning. The early developments of professional social work occurred in societal contexts of industrialisation and urbanisation. Many, if not all, of the pioneering social workers towards the end of the nineteenth century worked with newcomers from the countryside or from other countries, not least the hordes of Europeans arriving across the Atlantic to the promised land in the West (Addams, 1905; Richmond, 1917). Undoubtedly some of these persons were refugees, although at that point in time refugees did not exist as a legal or political category. As such, refugees emerged in connection with the First and Second World Wars. The first international definition of the refugee status was presented by the Commission for Refugees within the League of Nations in 1921, and today's international definition is set in the United Nations (UN) 1951 Refugee Convention.

In social work, the category of refugee became central during and in the aftermath of the Second World War, when it emerged as a field of practice not least through the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). UNRRA was established in 1943 to organise relief and rehabilitation in post-war situations. Initially interventions included restoration of public services and reconstitution of health and social services in Europe. This institutionalisation of social work within a UN body later led to the expansion of (western) social work to developing countries, as discussed, for instance, by Healy (2008).

For this Special Issue, it is crucial to consider the implications of this development from a critical perspective on refugees as a category. The study of refugees goes back to the times of the First and Second World Wars. The refugee situations that developed in the aftermath of the wars were chaotic, and there was a lack of comprehension about how to manage it. This called for studies about how states and international organisations could solve the situation. However, this point of departure meant that research was rather applied, and that the refugee category as defined by the UN legal framework remained unquestioned for a long time (Black, 2001; Chimni, 2009; Elie, 2014; Skran & Daughtry, 2007). This condition did not change until the late 1980s.

In the early 1980s, Refugee Studies was institutionalised as an independent area of research. This can for instance be seen in the inauguration of the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University, Canada in 1981 and of the Refugee Studies Centre at Oxford University, UK in 1983. It can also be seen in the establishment of dedicated academic journals (Black, 2001). This development is to be understood in the light of the changing dynamics of refugee migration that occurred at this time. In principle, it was about managing the increased refugee migration from the Global South to the Global North (Chimni, 1998). In a European perspective, for instance, refugees increased in numbers from around 25,000 in 1975 to over 150,000 in 1980 (Lucassen, 2018).

Studies of forced migration, or Forced Migration Studies, emerged during the 1990s as a critique of the narrow framing of the 'refugee' together with a critique of the applied approach of Refugee Studies (Chimni, 2009; Elie, 2014; Skran & Daughtry, 2007). The critique is extensive and argues, among other things, that it is unreasonable to consider persons who managed to cross an

international border to be in need of international protection, and people who did not make it as 'not in need'. It is against this critique that the concept of Internally Displaced Persons was introduced. Moreover, the critique addresses the essentialism of the refugee category, as if refugees are inherently uprooted and deviant people (Malkki, 1995). More recently, the debate has been extended to include deportation and forced immobility or sedentarism. Studies of deportation focus on the fact that states deport people, as a kind of forced (return) migration (see e.g. Gibney, 2013). Forced sedentarism or immobility is about non-migrants who are, for instance, born and raised in refugee camps with no legal way out of this situation (Fiddan-Qasmiyeh et al., 2014).

These insights have far-reaching implications for social work in contexts of forced migration of varying forms. What is, for instance, the role of social work in situations of deportation or forced immobility? Is it to support deportation or the individual who wants to stay? Is it to enhance ways out of refugee camps, legal or not, or to delimit the suffering of living and bringing up children in one such camp? Hence, one, as basic as relevant question is from who's perspective social work research and practice is to be conducted. There is an obvious tension between research that provides applicable knowledge following the categories and legal frameworks given by policy and established routines, and research that develops a critique of these (Black, 2001).

Another critical question has to do with the territorial dimension of global inequality, regarding both migration and social work. This points to the fact that studies about refugees emerged with the purpose of managing refugee flows in the receiving 'global north'. In fact, refugee migration from the 'global south' to the 'global north' should be analysed in the light of colonialism (Chimni, 1998). In the case of social work, the critique is focussed on the national framing of this discipline and profession, also when working with mobile populations (see e.g. Righard, 2018; Righard & Boccagni, 2015). This also involves the consequences of changing border control dynamics, not limited to the perspective of the 'global north' but also the 'global south' (Chimni, 1998; Lucassen, 2018). This perspective has major implications for social work as a field of research and practice, not least in the view of the current development of controls of both internal and external borders of the European Union. It feeds into debates about social justice between groups within countries (for instance due to legal status), between countries within the EU and on the global scale.

Yet another contentious but relevant question regards current developments of migration control and their implications for social work. While the refugee immigration in 2014–2016 is associated with an unprecedented 'crisis', and with the enhancement of restrictive immigration measures both across the EU and outside of its borders, this was not the case, at least not in the same way, for refugee immigration in the 1990s. Building on a historical analysis, Lucassen (2018) argues that while large number of refugees did come into Europe in 2014–2016, this in itself does not make up to explain the harsh response that followed. The framing of this immigration as a 'crisis' cannot be understood in relation to sheer numbers. In contrast to the 1990s, refugee immigration is now coupled with unprecedented problematisations of Islam, including terrorism, and widespread populism (Lucassen, 2018). Several of the articles in this Special Issue show how the crisis discourse impacted on social work and social workers in the reception of newcomers during and after the 2015 – immigration to the EU (e.g. Giudici, 2020; Lintner, 2020). The temporal dimension is central here, as social work with refugee reception developed into a permanent condition of crisis or emergency.

This also means that current refugee immigration must be understood in societal contexts that are racialised in ways that are distinct to past refugee immigration. Current immigration is marked by populist debates, including the 'failure of multiculturalism' debate, which assumes clashes between the established and the outsiders. Yet, in contrast to what the famous work by Norbert Elias shows, here the clash is claimed to be grounded in the arrival of unworthy newcomers. In migration studies, this development has re-nurtured old debates about the race-migration nexus, including how this can be understood from various theoretical perspectives (Erel et al., 2016).

Obviously, this raises questions about the role of social work and of social workers in contentious situations of immigration policy. This debate is not new to social work (e.g. Humphries, 2004). It is grounded in a critical stance on the role of social work in policing the boundaries of welfare, and

it is linked to the debates about the territorial dimension of social work as mentioned above. It is also linked to debates about social work at the intersection of formal and informal practice, as some articles in this Special Issue suggest (Anghel & Grierson, 2020; Misje, 2020).

What is new for social work after the 'refugee crisis'?

As the previous section suggests, there is a whole «classificatory struggle» on who is (or should be) a refugee, and on the appropriate use of different legal and social categories. 'Realist' vs 'constructive' approaches vie against each other on the continuum between legal and social studies, as well as between academics and practitioners. This is no merely lexical matter, since acknowledging a status or not has major consequences, potentially of life or death, for those concerned (FitzGerald & Arar, 2018). With this premise, however, our concern is not so much with the identity or the essential markers of a 'real' refugee, opposite to a supposedly 'fictitious' one. The main concern, in a social work perspective, is rather how different legal categorizations result in more or less constrained structures of opportunities for professional action (regarding clients' authorised length of stay, eligibility for social welfare provisions, etc.); how legal categorizations interact with people's understanding of themselves and of their forced migration trajectories; more fundamentally, how deep-rooted vulnerabilities and on-going patterns of (im)mobility result in a more or less explicit, complex and hard-to-address demand for social protection.

What is common, and what is instead nation-, context- or group-specific, in the vulnerabilities and needs articulated by these populations, in the ways of addressing them, in the attendant challenges and dilemmas? For sure the label of forced migrants conflates a huge diversity in socio-demographics, migration trajectories and degrees of vulnerability. However, it is still possible to make some general points, keeping in mind that legal status acquisition marks a critical (albeit not irreversible) threshold in the access to welfare provisions.

Limited eligibility and high distrust toward formal services, scarce ties with receiving communities and relatively uncertain migration projects are the main critical commonalities across social work practice with asylum seekers and refugees. All of them are differently articulated, of course, following differences (and possibly further vulnerabilities) in gender, age, human capital, family background, and so forth. As important, just like for any client with an immigrant background, the label refugee cannot say all about the person who bears it. *Being* or *becoming* an asylum seeker, or a refugee, is a critical life event. It is not the only one though, and it cannot subsume all of the identities, interests, life projects and concerns of people who are also asylum seekers or refugees.

A relatively well-developed literature exists in formal social work on the predicament of applicants that are eventually granted some form of international protection, after a 'successful' application in place or as a result of resettlement from third countries (Popescu & Libal, 2018; Shaw & Funk, 2019). Indeed, getting a status does not necessarily eliminate the need for social support. Social marginalisation may persist among status holders and turn out to be even more traumatic than the previous migration experience (Fell & Fell, 2014). However, there is another side to the vulnerability of forced migrants that is less visible, and potentially more problematic. Relatively little research exists, in a properly social work terrain, on the needs and vulnerabilities of potential or 'failed' claimants: all those who are denied a status, stuck in transit, or simply in a condition of protracted waiting, out of the purview of formal welfare institutions. This reveals structural limitations to the mandate of formal social service agencies, while opening up a field in which different forms of social support are negotiated (and studied, under rubrics such as arrival infrastructures [Meuss et al., 2019; Schrooten & Meeus, 2020, this issue]).

Besides their limited remit of action toward populations with an unclear legal status, social workers employed in public services – that is, generally speaking, the majority of professional social workers – may be less in a position to operate in advocacy, or anyway in a perspective of transformative social work. This should lead to highlight and address the broader political determinants of forced migration, as underlined above, rather than being content with a narrowly defined, and urgency-

driven, 'need-based approach' (Nuttman-Schwartz & Levanon, 2019). At the same time, the distinction in the remit of social work practice with refugees in institutional vs. civil society settings should not be over-stressed. There are major challenges and dilemmas that cut across it, if only for the dependence of third sector providers on public funding that may be erratic, unnecessarily limited, or subject to managerial procedures that leave little space for relational social work anyway (Robinson & Masocha, 2017).

Having said this, it is fundamental to see what constellations of social solidarity are created between different formal and informal social actors in local contexts of reception; how sustainable these initiatives are over time, and how they interact with mounting anti-refugee pressures; what role social work assumes as part and parcel of them, and how far it mediates between conflicting institutional and professional mandates. There is a promise in exploring further the 'interstices' emerging within hostile law or policy provisions (Fontanari & Ambrosini, 2018), where alliances are negotiated between different sympathetic actors, including social movements, volunteers (e.g. Anghel & Grierson, 2020 in this issue) and families that promote domestic hospitality (see Ran & Join-Lambert, 2020 in this issue). The constitutive legal weakness of forced migrants, in other words, may be offset by a remarkable civic strength – although in ways, extents and impact that vary significantly across contexts and pathways of reception. So does the role and mandate of professional social workers.

Another major commonality in social work with refugees, on the professional side, has to do with an unusual degree of *institutional ambiguity*. Asylum seekers do not necessarily have a sense of the division of labour between social workers in local reception or integration initiatives and the officers in charge of the legal assessment of their case. In a way, these are just different faces of one complex and opaque apparatus, which call for the same degree of distance, and possibly of distrust, from their side. What soon becomes clear, however, is the centrality of the interview with the case worker assessing the asylum application, and possibly of the following appeals, to their life conditions and opportunities; hence, the crafting of a self-narrative, and possibly of an identity, perceived to be the most suitable to make it through these critical thresholds. In fact, there was hardly any monolithic or 'authentic' refugee story or identity in the first place, to be 'manipulated' at a later stage (Danstrøm & Whyte, 2018). Even so, the experience of asylum seekers and refugees is marked by a continuous narrative and identity work, on oneself and one's memories. This is also a way to cope with the traumas that were present in the past, and still creep into the present.

It is not surprising, then, that the relationships between asylum seekers and social workers – including those with an exclusively helping mandate – may be marked by high distrust. Refugee clients 'don't tell me the truth', says a social worker interviewed by Robinson and Masocha (2017, p. 1523), articulating an experience that probably resounds with that of many colleagues. However, there is far more to this stance than 'not telling the truth'. Rather, there is a complexity that mirrors the suffering or the trauma inherent in the events being told, and then the pain of recollection and of the narrative act itself. Likewise, there is the struggle to make sense of one's story again along lines perceived to be the good ones for the practical (but existentially critical) purpose at stake, i.e. getting asylum.

As a result, in-depth relational work with asylum seekers, including helping interviews, is remarkably complex. Interviews require the development of some mutual trust over time and need to be situated in an appropriate framework of roles and mutual expectations. In this context, silence may be less a failure than a fact to be accepted, or at least negotiated over time through significant relational investment (Eastmond, 2007; Ghorashi, 2008), even while managerialized working contexts make this aim hard to pursue (cf. Kakela, 2020 in this issue). What social workers do encounter, in any case, is an emotional, relational and even epistemological challenge (in being aware of what happened *before*) that may be more radical and harder to decipher than in ordinary social work with migrants.

Yet another *fil rouge* across local and national experiences of refugee reception has to do with temporality. Much has been written on the 'frozen time' of protracted displacement, including for asylum seekers *waiting* for their cases to be processed (Rotter, 2016), or denied asylum seekers

waiting for what will happen next (Griffiths, 2014). However, there is more than the weight of waiting to their temporal experience. This is an ongoing combination between the burden of the past, a sense of being stuck in the present and a very unclear construction of the future – a terrain that, while being potentially more open, is hard to predict, let alone control from the here-and-now. Such a temporal complexity challenges social workers' need to co-produce helping relations as time-dependent and future-oriented processes, once both future and past turn to be difficult to approach and discuss.

Moreover, the fragmented temporality of a number of rejected claimants and other people engaged in secondary movements across Europe results in a limited and unpredictable time horizon for social work intervention. This often brings it down to a matter of basic assistance through occasional encounters, rather than feeding into cumulative forms of client empowerment. There may be a trade-off, with highly mobile clients, between necessarily contingent one-shot interventions and the professional aim to build long-term helping relationships on fragmented and multi-sited life trajectories. While this is clearly a case where transnational social work initiatives would be commendable (Boccagni et al., 2015), there are all financial, organisational and practical constraints that make them unlikely. These include forced migrants' own reluctance to follow up with what are generally perceived as different faces of the same control apparatus, as argued above.

Overall, a remarkable bipolarity exists, in the literature on forced migrants in Europe, between accounts that emphasise (forced) immobility – hence protracted waiting and existential limbo – and stories of hypermobility, or at least of continuous attempts to be mobile across state external and internal borders against their aspirations and opportunities (see, in this issue, Elsrud, 2020; Misje, 2020). In fact, key transitions do occur in refugee lives – they are not just a matter of empty waiting – and pathways can indeed be traced in them over time. What is most striking in the literature is rather the contrast between the hypervisibility of some critical events, such as journeys, refugee interviews and appeals, and the utter invisibility of anything else. The point is that the practice of social work with them has primarily to do with this blurred terrain of *non-events:* the autonomous significance of everyday life in waiting and of the interests, skills and resources people may exercise and cultivate even there, before a final decision is taken on their case. This has a number of implications for practice, research and education, to be briefly discussed in the last section.

Key implications and ways ahead

Social work with refugees and highly mobile populations has a complexity of its own. It involves different realms of expertise – socio-legal, no less than health and social care ones – and leaves little scope for helping relationships built up through protracted engagement with legally eligible clients. It involves, therefore, a critical understanding of the reproduction of structural inequalities, informed also by Refugee Studies and Forced Migration Studies, but also an understanding of racialisation and of its variations over space and time. In practice, it is far from desirable that social workers cope with this complexity only (or primarily) by learning-on-the-job, as several studies reveal. And yet, as far as higher education is concerned, the challenge has not to do only with strong interdisciplinarity, but also with the implications of this face-to-face interaction which lies at the core of much social work. As important, of course, is the role of advocacy – based on cultivating the ability to look at broader scenarios – within their professional remit (Zavirsek, 2017).

All this being said, there is also the need for education and professional organisations to support personal development and self-awareness. That individual students and practitioners may cultivate more or less hostile attitudes to 'undeserving' clients, just like anybody else, is still often a taboo issue. Yet, this requires to be acknowledged and specifically addressed in professional education and training. There is more to these stances than downright hostility or racism, which might be not so surprising wherever professionals did not receive training during their education, and are under-resourced, isolated, or poorly supervised (Fazzi, 2015). Besides this, in these times of radical populism, prospective social workers need to be more reflexive of the emotional work associated

with their own personal (lack of) experiences of structural inequalities, and with their reactions to what refugees-as-clients disclose or omit with them. No matter how 'traumatic' and 'credible' clients' stories are, it is primarily up to social workers to be confident and sensitive enough to pave the way for a trustful relationship to emerge (Robinson & Masocha, 2017).

Refugees tend to have a marginal position towards formal social work institutions, both in a legal sense and in a socio-relational one, although with significant variations between countries and localities. This, however, by no means decreases their importance as a target group for social workers. If anything, it calls for further efforts at reaching out, not only in the domain of practice but also research wise. There is so much to learn, for social workers, from ethnographies of the every-day life of people 'stuck in transit' or in recursive patterns of mobility that still leave them in social marginality, regardless of the context. Enhancing social workers' engagement with qualitative fieldwork, including participatory social research (in this issue, see Allegri et al., 2020; Börjesson & Forkby, 2020), is then a very urgent task in itself. Equally important is the development of comparative research across countries, for instance regarding the reception of unaccompanied refugee minors (in this issue, see Lietaert et al., 2020), or social inclusion initiatives for young refugees (in this issue, see Pratiwi et al., 2020).

At the same time, the need for stronger bridges to be built out of the profession leads us back to one last fundamental point, for purposes of advocacy. Whether in a domain of practice, education or research, social work with refugees (and migrants in general) can hardly be effective as long as it involves the latter alone. Rather, it also has to do with the reaction, and need to adapt, from the side of so-called receiving societies. While an emphasis on refugee agency and resilience is a welcome corrective to all victimising accounts, it still does not reach to this ultimate point: the need to look at (and invest primarily in) the relationships with the mainstream society, and to open larger spaces of acceptance, inclusion and recognition from within the latter.

Note

1. The research cluster IMASP - International migration and social protection was founded by Erica Righard and Paolo Boccagni and operated between 2012 and 2018 as a network among researchers and practitioners in different European countries. The network activities have been subsumed since 2019 into the new IMISCOE Standing Committee MITRA, on migrant transnationalism.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributors

Paolo Boccagni is a professor of Sociology, University of Trento, and principal investigator of ERC HOMInG – The home-migration nexus and MIUR HOASI - Home and asylum seekers in Italy. His areas of expertise include homemaking, trans-nationalism, migration, social welfare, diversity and care. He has recently done research on the views, emotions and representations underlying social work practice with immigrants and refugees in Italy. His publications in social work include papers in the *British Journal of Social Work, Ethnic* and *Racial Studies* and *the Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*.

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(in *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 2018) and 'Transnational social vulnerabilities and reconfigurations of 'social policy'' (co-authored with Mikael Spång, in *Handbook on Society and Social Policy*, Edward Elgar Publishing 2020).

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