


‘My life as a second-class human being’: Experiences of a refugee academic

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Abstract

This paper reviews some theoretical ideas about how refugees are positioned within social, psychological and humanitarian debates and then, discusses the concept of ‘refugee academics’ with references to the struggles of Syrian scholars who are living in exile. Drawing upon one Syrian academic’s experiences of displacement and academic life in exile, it argues that the social and political constructs of ‘refugeeness’ and depiction of these academics as victims or societal threats as refugees need to be transformed into narratives of human acceptance, opportunities of coproduction of knowledge, academic diversity and mutual benefits.

Key Words

Refugee academics
Syrian conflict
Displacement
Exile

Introduction

One Friday evening, after we had our dinner in a downtown restaurant, Mohammad (pseudonym) invited us to his rented apartment for some Syrian bites and tea. My colleague and I sat on the sofa and started looking around his sitting room. There were books, artworks and artefacts that represented his ‘home’ in Syria. Every time I meet with Mohammad during my research trip to Tuleeg (pseudonym for Mohammad’s country of exile), I ask him about how the situation is like back ‘home’ in Syria. During my first meeting with him, Mohammad had mentioned about a new library he had set up at home but had to leave everything behind when he fled suddenly as the security risks mounted. In the middle of our conversation that night, he went silent for a moment and mentioned, ‘I never thought I would live my life as a second-class human being.’ This was an individual who was professionally well accomplished as a medical doctor, public health professional and academic researcher but suddenly found himself devoid of his political rights, personal freedom, professional dignity because of being a refugee.

In conflict-affected settings and autocratic regimes, academic freedom, scholarship and safety of scholars is often at risk. This paper reviews some theoretical debates about social discrimination of refugees and experiences of Syrian refugee academics and then, reports on experiences of Mohammad, one such academic who is living in exile in Tuleeg. I first met with Mohammad in 2014 and was inspired by his wealth of experience, positivity and intellect, which, later on, developed into research collaboration and friendship. As a researcher on education in conflict-settings, I have always found Mohammad’s story inspirational as well as revealing, hence, invited him to a research interview to reflect upon his journey to and experience of life in exile. This interview was conducted in May 2020 as part of a larger research project that focuses on

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developing sustainable ways to improve the quality of life of the people in protracted crisis. Reflecting upon his experiences as a refugee academic and engaging with theoretical ideas, the paper argues that social and political constructs of 'refugeeness' tend to override all other forms of identities and the academic in exile is no exception. Comparatively, from the basic survival perspective, refugee academics might be considered privileged given their extended social and cultural capital and personal agency to navigate pressures around access to food, health and education for their children but limitations around spatial mobility, political freedom and uncertainty around their futures are similar to general refugee populations who are stuck in camps or host communities.

Firstly, this paper provides some theoretical discussions on the critique of humanitarianism and ways attitudes towards refugees are produced in host countries. Then, a brief review of the concept of refugee academics and support systems is provided before discussing the debilitating experiences of Syrian refugee academics. This is followed by an analysis of displacement experiences of the Syrian academic and a conclusion is drawn with reference to the theoretical ideas and wider issues of academics in exile.

Humanitarianism and attitudes towards refugees

Historically, the use of term 'refugees' has been helpful in advocating for protection of forcibly displaced populations from neglect and persecution in their host communities. The definition of refugees also reminds host governments of their legal obligations to protect human rights and basic needs of the non-citizens who live within their territorial boundaries (UNHCR, 1951). It helps the international community and national governments to uphold the agenda of justice, refugees' rights to return home or get resettled and the need for political engagement to address the causes of human sufferings. International agreements on the protection of refugees underpin the notion of human rights and national governments' humanitarian responsibilities beyond their own citizens. However, there is also a growing critique of humanitarianism as a field of research and practice which is dominated by western agendas, funding and staffing that is opposed in many Southern contexts (Pacitto and

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013; Egeland, 2011; Chimni, 2000). Humanitarian agencies in these settings may be perceived as agents of neo-colonial Northern dominations with implicit security and economic interests. The international humanitarian regime has lately been critiqued as 'a contemporary manifestation of colonial imperatives' (Pacitto and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013: 6). Chimni described humanitarianism as 'the ideology of hegemonic states in the era of globalisation marked by the end of the Cold War and a growing North-South divide' (Chimni, 2000: 244), used to justify interventionism, often selective, on the ground of human security but mainly on the basis of whether there are geopolitical or economic benefits to the Western powers. Klein (2008) points out that emergencies such as natural disasters and violent conflicts are often followed by vigorous neoliberal policies, undermining the state's responsibility to cater for the needs of the affected populations; intensifying corporatisation of public services; and pushing through free market in which the emergency works as a 'shock therapy'. In contexts of crisis where opportunities are scarce and economic hardships are severe, competitive free market regimes destroy citizens' safety nets and the presence of refugees in those contexts only fuels citizens' perceptions of their social and economic vulnerability.

From a social psychology perspective, like immigrants, refugees also may face two types of attitudes from citizens: 'group inclusion' that brings out shared, egalitarian natures or prospects of contribution to their society, or 'group threat' exposing citizens' prejudicial, oppressive natures (Pratto and Lemieux, 2001). 'Group inclusion' may be increased when there are social and economic benefits of refugee inflows to the host communities. For example, refugees 'can bring skills and contribute to the human capital stock, as well as stimulate trade and investment', as well as 'create employment opportunities, and attract aid and humanitarian investments in, for example, infrastructure, which would benefit refugees as well as the society as a whole' (Khoudour and Andersson, 2017: 11). However, refugees also place a burden on host countries' public expenditures with negative impacts on labour market outcomes such as wages, employment and labour force participation of the host population (Khoudour and Andersson, 2017: 12).

These experiences exemplify 'group threat', creating inter-group tensions between refugees and host communities.

Citizens' attitudes towards refugees also characterise ideas of 'fairness' on humanitarian grounds or 'threats' to their own social identity or economic wellbeing. The 'fairness motives' lead to a welcoming environment to refugees and asylum seekers whereas, the 'threat motives' produce hatred, racism, exclusion or rejection (Louis *et al.*, 2007: 54). These dilemmas are deeply rooted in citizens' understanding and increased awareness of 'social identity (who are we and who are they?), prejudice and discrimination (how do we feel about each other and how do we treat each other?) and intergroup relations (what relation will our groups have?)' (Pratto and Lemieux, 2001: 413–414). Social recognition of refugees as rightful human beings, accepting them in the employment sector and their inclusion in professional roles as non-hierarchical members of the society become contested processes.

Social dominance theory provides a useful theoretical explanation to the prevalence of complex 'intergroup relations' between refugees and host communities. As Pratto and Lemieux (2001: 414) note, such relations can be 'understood by analyzing how individual propensities for prejudice, socially shared meaning systems, and institutional discrimination relate to one another' (also see: Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). From this perspective, individuals who have higher levels of social dominance orientation (SDO) tend to believe in social hierarchies and have negative attitudes towards those who represent low power groups such as, refugees. Whereas, those who have low levels of SDO believe that equal treatment of people can reduce social problems. These belief systems are reflected in people's support for social policies relating to refugees, 'that is, people high on SDO generally support policies that would enhance and maintain social hierarchy, whereas people low on SDO generally support policies that would attenuate social hierarchy' (Pratto and Lemieux, 2001: 418). However, in contemporary social psychology research, there are two lines of explanation about why some people are more prejudiced than others: personal attributes, asserting that prejudice is a 'personality trait' (Allport, 1954) and 'people's social identity, social self-categorization, or social position' (Ekehammar *et al.*, 2004: 464). In other

words, people's innate personality characteristics and their social conditioning predict their attitudes towards the out-groups. In particular, historical events (e.g. sectarian or ethnic violence, civil wars, conflict between the country of refugee origin and host country etc.), national political dynamics and social structures (e.g. religious or ethnic composition of the host society in relation to the backgrounds of the refugee populations) shape the processes of in-group's self-categorisation and socio-political positioning. These theoretical ideas are useful in explaining why refugee academics, as low power groups, are discriminated against or welcomed in host countries' institutional environments. For example, as Watenpaugh *et al.* (2014: 14) note, 'Lebanese policy makers and much of the population view social problems, politics, and security issues through the lens of sectarian communal identification while abstract notions of common Lebanese citizenship or human rights have little currency'.

Refugees are often represented as depersonalised corporeal entities who have been displaced, maimed and homeless. As Malkki (1996: 378) argues, the process of dehistoricising and homogenising refugee category as universal men, women and children turn them into 'mute victims'. Additionally, the state-centric approach to defining political identity deprives non-citizens of their ability to influence policies and regulations that impact on their lives within the host countries. This situation delegates the responsibility of representing refugee voice, with few exceptions, to international agencies, such that 'narration of refugee experiences becomes the prerogative of Western 'experts': refugee lives become a site where Western ways of knowing are reproduced' (Rajaram, 2002: 247). Both the media representation of refugees and their depiction in the humanitarian literature in the form of visual, textual and digital resources reproduces the notion of 'refugeeness' as speechless physical bodies devoid of individuality and political agency. These representations tend to generate 'pity' and serve for fundraising for humanitarian agencies but also reproduce the generalised Western narratives about refugee experiences – as victimhood. Rajaram (2002: 251) further argues that the generalisation of refugees as depoliticised helpless victims obscures 'the particularity of different sorts of refugee experience'. This is not to deny that refugee populations are in urgent need of humanitarian aid such as food, shelter, healthcare and education, nor

to deny their past experience of violence and political persecution or ongoing social and political exclusion in the host societies, but to argue that defining their existence within the boundaries of helplessness and speechlessness offers an unhelpful and incomplete characterisation of their being. Malkki rightly points out that in abstracting refugees' 'predicaments from specific political, historical, cultural contexts, humanitarian practices tend to silence refugees' (Malkki, 1996: 378). Silencing the refugee voice is a process of denial of individual humanity as well as to restrict narratives about rights and freedoms within the state territoriality. As a consequence, 'refugee identity' underpins notions of their origin, culture and nationality and hence, they need to be either reunited with their nation of origin (right of return) or resettled to find new home and new citizenship based on their preference.

Refugees are perceived as a threat to 'societal security', a notion that refers to a society's ability to sustain and reproduce its essential character (Wæver, Buzan and Kelstrup, 1993). In this sense, a group's societal security is threatened when they are prevented from reproducing their social identity and transmitting it to new generations. Unlike state security which puts emphasis on the analysis of its territorial integrity and national sovereignty, societal security has 'identity' in the centre of analysis. Hence, societal insecurity exemplifies threats to dominant ethno-national and religious identities whose survival, quality of life and national identity is perceived to be at risk because of refugee inflows. Shanks (2019: 16) notes, 'for societies that perceive a threat to their identity, whether the threat is real or imagined, a clear defensive strategy is to strengthen societal security'. Such a defensive strategy could constitute anti-refugee media campaigns, portraying refugees as a national security threat; right-wing vilification of refugees as undesirable beneficiaries of social welfare system; and revival of ultra-nationalism. At a practical level, these approaches are manifested through prevention of refugees in the national policy discourse, excluding them from access to education, health services and employment. However, the societal security theory overestimates communities as homogenous entities and undermines in-group contestations in which some individuals may be willing to embrace societal change characterised by openness, equality, and acceptance of out-groups who may have become victims of conflict or political persecution.

'Refugee academics'

Boyd, Akker and Wintour (2009: 53–54) note that 'when regimes are, or become, dictatorial, or where civil strife intensifies, those who 'speak truth unto power' through criticism, through pointing out alternative possibilities, or through upholding ethical standards – key academic duties – are all too likely to suffer job loss, imprisonment, torture or expulsion.' Mass displacement of academics places huge cost on the country of their origin not only in terms of the loss of human capital but also destruction of intellectual life of the entire community. For example, a large-scale expulsion of researchers, philosophers and scientists from Nazi Germany had a debilitating impact on the country's academic position, a world leader in scholarship before Hitler, which never managed to regain its academic strength post-World War II (Medawar and Pyke, 2000). On the contrary, refugee scholars contribute to scientific, intellectual and cultural life of the receiving societies, and to internationalism and academic transformation in the academic environment of their host institutions (Elsner, 2017). During the World War II, British institutions received several German academics who held positions in different Oxford, Cambridge and London colleges (Brockliss, 2017). However, refugee academics often encounter nationalist protests, marginalisation and rejection within the host academic environment (Brockliss; 2017; Özdemir, 2019). Historically, even the appointment of a distinguished scholar like Albert Einstein at Oxford was protested on the grounds that public funds should only be used to support British scholars (Grenville, 2017: 53). Grenville (2017: 55) further notes that refugee academics were marginalised both socially and professionally and deprived of 'access to Oxford's social networks, while pressure to protect 'British' jobs from foreign intruders created a situation where only the determined advocacy of the refugees' supporters could overcome the barriers'.

Many of these academics were then supported by the Academic Assistance Council (AAC, later the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL)) and now the Cara (Council for At-Risk Academics)¹. Boyd, Akker and Wintour (2009: 53) present the testimony of Albie Sachs, one such grantee of Cara fellowship who would later become a Justice of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of South Africa. Sachs describes his experience of becoming a refugee and gratitude of

receiving support from Cara as, 'you feel crushed. You lose self-esteem, and although the political will remains strong, you suffer... I received just the right touch of warmth of heart and practicality [from the organisation].' Today, there are other organisations such as the Scholar Rescue Fund – Institute of International Education (SRF-IIE) and Scholars at Risk Network (SAR) that support at-risk academics under the principles of humanitarian compassion. Even though these support programmes have been exceptionally worthwhile both to individuals in establishing their academic lives and to human society through their scientific contributions (e.g. 16 of Cara supported scholars have won Nobel prizes), Özdemir (2019: 1) argues that the appropriateness of such 'compassionate temperament' can be questioned in understanding the experiences of at-risk academics who have been exiled due to political persecution. He argues that 'the emotions of pity and compassion cannot provide a political panacea for those who are exiled via political processes' and the framing of 'victimhood' limits the necessity 'to consult, study and draw conclusions' from how these moral emotions impact on their diverse experiences in exile (Özdemir, 2019: 3-4). A range of research contributions by Syrian academics in exile, included in this Special Issue, and elsewhere (Parkinson *et al.*, 2018), epitomises the need for academic support and collaboration rather than mere humanitarian compassion. The following section will briefly discuss conflict and displacement-related experiences of Syrian academics.

Struggles of displaced Syrian academics

Since the civil war began in 2011, Syrian higher education has been severely disrupted due to the large-scale academic displacement and destruction of physical infrastructure, erosion of institutional capacities and loss of human capital (Pherali and Abu Moghli, 2019; Barakat and Milton, 2015; Watenpaugh *et al.*, 2014a; 2014b). In addition to forced displacement of university students, between 1500 – 2000 university professors have also fled the country (King, 2016). Those who have stayed back may support the regime; are compelled to keep low profiles and remain silent about its aggressive actions; are unable to take risks of leaving the country; not qualified enough or lack in confidence

to find academic work in foreign institutions; and may have difficult social and family circumstances preventing them to leave the country (Anonymous, 2016). The Syrian Ministry of Higher Education has also barred its academics from taking up external unpaid sabbaticals, making it impossible for them to work temporarily outside without losing their positions in Syria, while anyone who leaves Syria would be considered 'traitors to the nation' (Watenpaugh *et al.*, 2014a). There is also mandated conscription of men over 18 and regulated through military service booklets and the government has established roaming and temporary check points to catch the military service dodgers (King, 2016). Anyone who is found to have evaded the mandatory military service is prosecuted and universities are instructed to hire only those who have completed the military service and to withhold salaries if staff are found not to have served in the armed forces (King, 2016: 12).

Syrian academics in exile are 'often unable to continue their academic work due to legal status, language barriers, psychological trauma, unrecognised qualifications, and other factors' (Parkinson, McDonald and Quinlan, 2020: 185). Those academics who have been displaced to Syria's neighbouring countries are afraid of being targeted for violent attacks because of their political positions on the Syrian conflict. Watenpaugh *et al.*, (2014a: 27) also note that the Assad regime's network in Lebanon and possible threats to Syrian academics discourage university administrators in Lebanon from hiring Syrian faculty with anti-Assad political views. Islamic State (IS) continues to pose a threat to the personal safety of Syrian academics in the South of Turkey who oppose its ideology (Cara, 2019: 77).

A collaborative study between academics from the University of Cambridge and Syrian academics in exile highlights some powerful testimonies of Syrian academics' journey into displacement, experiences in exile and reflections on professional and civic identity before and after their displacement (Cara, 2019). Many academics tried to maintain 'relational equilibrium' (Pherali, 2016: 485) between different armed groups and the state army as a survival strategy but the fear of detention and being caught in the crossfire forced them to flee (Cara, 2019).

¹Most of the papers in this Special Issue have been contributed by Syrian academics who have been supported by Cara for their research and academic development. See Hanley's paper for evaluation of Cara programmes in this issue.

In exile, their economic, social and political vulnerability constantly reminds them of their home, fulfilling professional career and stable family life back in Syria, which has been lost to the violent conflict. Many of them refuse to accept 'any affiliation with refugee status,' because it strips them from exercising their agency and reminds of 'being rootless, stateless and rejected' (Cara, 2019: 78). This rejection stems from difficult living conditions in exile, quest for a sense of belonging and loss of dignity and independence in life. Parkinson *et al.* (2018) also provide a rich account of their stressful experiences in exile and highlight the need of mutual collaboration; and international academic solidarity. Building upon the notions of 'relational expertise' and 'relational agency' (Edwards, 2011), broadly defined as aptitudes to coproduce knowledge through nonhierarchical collaborations, they argue that 'Syrian academics and their international partners must develop ways of working together to sustain academic activity and develop strategies and resources for the present and future' (Parkinson *et al.*, 2018: 145).

Despite a clear sense of pride in their profession and academic identity, most Syrian academics are unable to continue their academic work in exile (Faulkner, 2020). For example, in Lebanon, 'with few exceptions, Syrian academics are unable to secure academic work in Lebanese universities without external support from international organisations' (Watenpaugh *et al.*, 2014a: 33). There are, however, some international organisations such as Cara who support Syrian academics in exile to secure academic work through fellowships or to engage in research (see Hanley in this issue). These organisations help displaced academics to secure placements in international institutions and provide research support, which is 'transformational for individuals' but 'this approach is resource-heavy and limited to academics who are able to travel' (Parkinson, McDonald and Quinlan, 2020: 186). The scale of demand is much higher than the capacity of these programmes. International placement programmes are also unhelpful for many such as, female scholars who are culturally restricted from being able to travel unaccompanied, and those do not have passports or travel documents, preventing them from travelling out of or within the country of exile. It may also be difficult for some academics to produce proof of

qualifications and transcripts which may have been lost, damaged or left behind when they fled the war (Pherali and Abu Moghli, 2019). Given the rise of ethno-nationalist and anti-refugee politics in Europe and the US, chances of securing visas to travel abroad are also limited.

Reflecting on the experiences of a Syrian academic in exile

Now, I return to my conversation with Mohammad whose journey into displacement, experience of academic and social life in exile and the unknown future depict an array of psychological vulnerability. Mohammad describes that his 'refugee identity' makes him feel inferior among his fellow academics and vulnerable within his social and professional space in exile. He points out that the notions of 'exile' and 'refugee academics' carry different meanings in different contexts and not all refugee academics would be fully equipped to work in international academic institutions:

Maybe there is a broad definition to depict the notions of 'academician' and 'exile'. Exile is not one. Exile in Lebanon is different from exile in Stockholm or in Germany or in a good university in the UK. It could be more difficult in Egypt or in Lebanon or in Yemen. So, experience of exile is not the same. Likewise, academician also could not be the same because the academic environments and host country contexts determine the experiences of refugee academics.

As noted in the testimonies of Syrian academics in exile (Cara, 2019; Parkinson *et al.*, 2018), Mohammad also describes his professional life prior to displacement as stable, fulfilling and successful. He describes: 'At the start of my career, I was a practicing clinician. Then, I began to work as a public health practitioner, beside my clinical practice as a surgeon. I supervised public health programmes under the Ministry of Health in Syria. So, my knowledge about public health stems from practice, not from academic research'. He further expounds:

When I moved into research and received a big research grant from a US foundation, we established a research centre. In Syria, it is not possible to operate independently so, we tried to be affiliated with a university and build partnerships with NGOs that were working on the issues of chronic diseases. The city

where I lived was fairly quiet at the start of the uprising in 2011, so, we kept doing our work. But interestingly, by mid 2011, when we started implementing our research, it was increasingly difficult to collaborate with the university and Ministry of Health. Our offices were also located in the frontline of clashes between the rebels and government forces so, we faced the physical risk of accessing our office premises. Because we were an independent research centre and our project was funded by the US money, the regime would treat us as US spies.

Medical doctors like Mohammad also faced heightened pressures from the regime because of their professional backgrounds. Since late 2011, health care has been weaponised in the Syrian conflict involving attacks on 'health-care facilities, targeting health workers, obliterating medical neutrality, and besieging medicine' (Fouad *et al.*, 2017: 2516) and health professionals who provided health care to the injured protesters were also treated as enemies of the state. More importantly, they were required to report the case of medical treatment to the government. Mohammad notes: 'We started treating the injured protesters. It was not something the Syrian government wanted to see. So, they wanted health professionals to leave or else get killed if they supported the Syrian opposition.' As a result, health workers' professional ethics were highjacked by the militarised state. In mid 2012, another wave of state repression began, involving kidnapping of health workers for ransom (Baker, 2014), and the state ignored criminal activities conducted by the pro-regime militia. This was when many doctors started leaving Syria because of the fear of being kidnapped, as well as the fact that they were not able to practice ethically. Some doctors were arrested, and some were tortured to death. Mohammad lamented:

...for me, personally, one of my colleagues was arrested and killed and other three were kidnapped, either themselves or their kids. Then, I felt very scared. I was in a dilemma about whether to stay or leave. I had young children. We had just built a new house. I loved my city and friends and I was not well. I started feeling that someone would come any time and kidnap me. So, I decided to leave and considered multiple destinations – Turkey or Lebanon or Egypt. Very few decided to go

to the gulf states, the idea that I did not like. I also considered going to Europe through smuggling, crossing the border illegally via Turkey. You could go to Turkey or Egypt without a visa at that time. So, many went to Turkey to try to go to Europe.

Mohammad wanted to stay close to Syria and did not think that the crisis would last long. So, he decided to go to Tuleeg because it was close to his home city and had some historical connections in the country. He had also hoped to immigrate to Europe but was luckily offered a visiting position at a prestigious university in Tuleeg. This gave him a sense of stability temporarily and the prospect of returning home as and when the war ended. Unfortunately, neither has the war ended, nor has he secured permanent residency in Tuleeg. Mohammad is stuck in 'limbo' (Dahya and Dryden-Peterson, 2017) like many other refugees in the MENAT region, even though the academic job he has managed to secure is incomparably better than the situation of many fellow academics in exile. However, Mohammad feels that he is underestimated because he does not have academic qualifications from a prestigious university and his previous affiliation is a mediocre university in Syria; he is a Syrian and, most significantly, he is a refugee in the host country. He elaborates:

Syrians are not generally welcomed here although I am generally fine in the university atmosphere. But going outside the university bubble, it is quite difficult. If you take a taxi and your accent is Syrian, the taxi driver would not be very happy. The best I get is pity for my situation but always making me feel that I am not very welcomed here, and I might take their jobs.

Mohammad reflects on his conversation with the dean of the research centre in his host university almost eight years ago when he mentioned that he wanted to work on refugee health. He was not received well, as refugee matters were perceived to be NGO business and not part of any serious academic research. He was able to transfer his existing fully funded research project on tobacco consumption and public health into his host university. In his own personal time, he started developing research proposals and building partnerships to work on refugee health issues which led to some impressive success. He now feels proud

to have attracted a significant amount of funding for research into chronic diseases among refugee populations. He explains:

Over the last eight years, I have secured 4.5 million dollars on 11 research projects and published 40 peer-reviewed articles in several journals, including the Lancet plus British Medical Journal and almost 20 commentaries and 4/5 reports. I have established refugee health as an important area of academic work. I can probably claim that I was one of the very few people who advocated for the issue of chronic diseases in humanitarian settings at the time when no one within humanitarian agencies was talking about this issue.

The above statement exemplifies an impressive level of academic success and contribution Mohammad has made to the host institution and in the area of refugee health. This has been possible with his hard work over the past eight years. Mohammad adds:

I should say, at one point of my career here, I almost lost my confidence. I work really hard – not sure if I made a worthy contribution, but due to the fear of being dismissed or of not being able to renew the contract or residence permit in the country, I worked almost 80 hours a week – more than 12 hours a day.

Mohammad's 'refugee identity', Syrian background and deep knowledge about chronic diseases among Syrian refugees have also opened up new opportunities for international research collaboration. With his successful portfolio of academic work, Mohammad feels that he is now taken more seriously within the institution even though there is 'an issue of the elite club deeply embedded' within the academic community, reminiscent of Grenville's (2017) description of social and professional marginalisation of refugee academics in Oxford some 80 years ago. Mohammed lamented: 'I am still on an annual contract, still cannot ask for permanent residency or work permit for my wife in Tuleeg.' Recently, in recognition of his work, Mohammad has been offered a job in a prestigious US university, but the COVID-19 crisis and Trump's anti-refugee policies have pushed his life in to further 'unknowns'. He painfully reports, that being a Syrian means that 'uncertainty is a way of living'.

Mohammad notes that he is grateful to his host institution and colleagues who have supported him and his children's university fees have been waived but, being the only Syrian among 800 faculty in the university, he metaphorically depicts his survival as 'a gladiator; you have to fight to survive'. Socially, his family lives in fear of discrimination – children do not speak in Arabic outside home, despite Arabic being a commonly spoken language in his host country, to avoid being identified as Syrians, and his wife, a qualified engineer, had to sign a legal document to refrain from work as a condition of his annual residence permit in Tuleeg. After completing university, his children would not get the residence permits or employment – his daughter managed to leave Tuleeg already after graduation and he is concerned about his son who would have to seek asylum elsewhere next year.

Mohammad's social and professional experience in Tuleeg shows that 'refugee identity' overrides his personal, social and professional identities. He feels that it is frustrating to be labelled as a refugee because:

...refugee is a downstream labelling. When you get this label, you automatically become inferior. Wherever you are, whatever you do. You are second to the counterpart. In this global system, you are put in a way that you are confronting the citizen. You are the enemy of the citizen. So, you are someone who needs assistance. It is not sort of sharing or collaborating. So, that's the problem. Academician is something second. Because it does not matter being an academician because being a refugee already makes you a less worthy person.

This shows that, for refugee academics, 'refugeeness' is a label or an imposed category that violates all other forms of social identities that they belong to. The formation of a social identity involves self-categorisation, emphasising similarities between the self and other in-group members and differences between the self and out-group members (Hogg and Abrams 1988). They may 'self-categorise' as refugees or 'socially compare' themselves with the other groups but unlike the formation of social identity as a process of enhancing 'self-esteem' (Stets and Burke, 2000: 225), refugee academics find the term 'refugee' to be dismissive of their other identities that embody their self-respect and dignity.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed some complex social and psychological dimensions that determine host communities' attitudes towards refugees, including exiled scholars. Social acceptance or rejection of exiled academics depends on host communities' perceptions about and attitudes towards refugees; a sense of social identity; and societal in/security of the host communities. The humanitarian narratives about refugees also predominantly underpin the notions of victimhood – vulnerable, undeserved and burdensome, which unhelpfully undermine refugee academics' potential and agency to produce globally relevant knowledge as well as to rebuild higher education in their country of origin.

The experience of exclusion and discrimination in the host country constantly reminds displaced academics of their 'refugeeness' which they find humiliating and disempowering to their identity as an academic. Despite their unwillingness to be labelled as a 'refugee', 'refugeeness' constantly creeps into realities of their life in exile and overrides their sense of freedom and self-respect. Academics like Mohammad are a small minority of Syrians who have successfully managed to continue their careers in exile despite numerous barriers. Yet, Mohammad's experience represents a troubling precarity about life in exile as well as the resource one refugee academic can bring into the host institution. Discontinuation of academic activities of Syrian scholars in exile hints a tragic loss of research and scholarship with a subsequent detrimental impact on the future prospect of Syrian higher education.

There is an urgent need to expand and reconfigure the discourse of vulnerability and helplessness to that of resource, agency and synergy that can be utilised to collectively respond to the crisis in higher education. There is also the need for attitudinal change from nationalist rejection to humanitarian acceptance of refugees as a global responsibility to deal with humanitarian crises that jeopardise the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG, 2015). To this end, national debates and policies need to be shifted towards a process of harnessing refugee academics' knowledge, skills and networks that benefit all.

Promisingly, there are some shifts in academic discourses as well as in research collaborations that acknowledge the shared responsibility to protect academic freedom, the research knowledge and the scholars at-risk, which reveal that refugee academics, if provided an opportunity and supported, can make a valuable contribution to the intellectual life of host institutions and their society. These shifts must be expanded and mainstreamed in the political, humanitarian and economic systems both at the national and global levels.

Author bio

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