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Emotions in Crisis: Consequences of Ceremonial Refugee Camp Visits to Bhutanese Refugee Camps in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Research on refugee resettlement frequently overlooks the larger context of the experience of forced migration. As a result, the micro-level interactions between refugees and the bureaucrats who make resettlement decisions are obscured. We can better understand the socio-political dynamics between refugees and the officials deciding their resettlement cases if we approach encounters between refugees and migration officials during ceremonial visits as sites of emotional exchange. This article examines the complex socio-political emotional exchanges of power and vulnerability that underpin the refugee resettlement process through an ethnographic analysis of Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal.

KEYWORDS

emotion; refugee resettlement; refugee status determination; humanitarianism; bureaucracy

RESUMÉ

Les recherches sur la réinstallation des réfugiés négligent souvent le contexte plus large de l'expérience de la migration forcée. En conséquence, les interactions au niveau micro entre les réfugiés et les bureaucrates qui prennent les décisions en matière de réinstallation sont occultées. Nous pouvons mieux comprendre les dynamiques sociopolitiques entre les réfugiés et les fonctionnaires qui prennent des décisions sur leurs cas en abordant les rencontres entre les réfugiés et les fonctionnaires de l'immigration pendant les visites officielles comme des lieux d'échange émotionnel. Cet article examine les échanges émotionnels sociopolitiques complexes de pouvoir et de vulnérabilité qui sous-tendent le processus de réinstallation des réfugiés à travers une analyse ethnographique des camps de réfugiés bhoutanais au Népal.

INTRODUCTION

The plight of the world's refugee crisis is at an all-time high. With increasing global conflicts, the number of individuals forced to flee is skyrocketing, with over 103 million displaced people worldwide, including 32.5 million refugees (UNHCR, 2023). Experiences of discrimination feature prominently in the resettlement accounts of refugees and asylum seekers, including in employment, in access to social services, and within neighbourhoods (Gans, 2009; Solberg et al.,

2021; Ziersch et al., 2020). Less than 1% of refugees are resettled annually despite a much greater need (UNHCR, 2022). Refugees granted resettlement face a lengthy and complex system of applications, vetting, and waiting that governs their everyday lives. Focusing on resettlement processes and interactions between migration officials and refugees in the Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal, this article is in part an answer to the question: How do refugees navigate the bureaucracy of forced migration?

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The United States, like other large resettlement countries, has created a complex bureaucracy with resettlement missions stationed across the globe to manage this form of transnational migration. For example, in the past, during peak resettlement of refugees from camps in Nepal, roughly every six weeks, the US Department of Homeland Security would send a team of about a dozen US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) officers to Nepal to conduct final exit interviews with refugees approved for resettlement to the United States.¹ To be granted an exit interview, refugees must have already spent a great deal of time in the camp. In addition, they must have applied for and received formal refugee identification from the United Nations and have gone through the International Organization for Migration's resettlement counselling and placement procedures. However, after completing these steps in the relocation process, USCIS officers can still deny them entry to the US for various reasons, effectively ending their resettlement prospects at the finish line of their years-long protracted displacement. Hence, the USCIS visit can be a highly stressful event for refugees, disrupting their daily lives.

As part of their visit to conduct final exit interviews, the USCIS team is invited to visit social programs and educational facilities in the camp. Ostensibly to "contextualize" the resettlement interviews, in practice, the trips to the refugee camp are superficial events best understood as ceremonial visits. This article is organized around one of these ceremonial visits; in it, I document the initial staging, the official performance of refugee-ness, the consumption of these performances by USCIS officers and their

reactions, and the unofficial performances that complete the ceremony. In addition, throughout the analysis, I draw on data collected during interactions with the USCIS officers and refugees to add depth and context.

The Case

In the late 1800s, thousands of individuals from Nepal migrated to the southern regions of Bhutan, which Druk Buddhists traditionally inhabited. The Nepalese migrants settled there in search of farmland and hopes of agricultural prosperity. Over time, this group became known as Lhotshampas, or "people of the south." For over a century, Lhotshampas enjoyed life in southern Bhutan, where they practised traditional Nepali customs, spoke the Nepali language, and maintained Nepali dress and diet. However, in the 1980s, Bhutan's king, a member of the Druk majority, became increasingly threatened by Lhotshampas. He subsequently created policies called "Bhutanization" under the "One Nation, One People" campaign, attempting to level all cultural practices to be strictly Bhutanese. These policies aimed to remove all semblances of Nepali/Lhotshampas culture from Bhutan (Saul, 2000). After a large-scale violent clash between protestors and the Bhutanese army in 1990, the Bhutanese government declared that any Lhotshampas unable to prove their citizenship since 1958 through land tax receipts were no longer considered citizens and must leave the country. Individuals forcibly signed "voluntary migration certificates" before being expelled from the country; those refusing to do so experienced beatings, torture, and regular imprisonment for extended periods with no legal representation or means to post bail (Evans, 2010; Hutt, 1996, 2003). Those who fled sought refuge in both West Bengal and Nepal, with a vast majority settling in

¹ During the 14-month period of fieldwork, the author observed USCIS officials making regular visits about every six weeks to conduct exit interviews with refugee applicants in the resettlement pipeline.

eastern Nepal, the site of seven refugee camps. The population in the camps at their height was well over 100,000 individuals.

In April 1993, facing international pressure, Bhutan reluctantly engaged in the first of 15 bilateral negotiations with Nepal, ultimately failing in efforts to either repatriate refugees to Bhutan or integrate them locally in Nepal (Evans, 2010; Ikram, 2005). In October 2006, the failure of the negotiation efforts resulted in the United States offering an initial resettlement of 60,000 Bhutanese refugees (Evans, 2010). Resettlement continued as New Zealand, Denmark, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, and Australia agreed to assist in resettlement (Gautam et al., 2021). Resettlement fundamentally changed daily life for the Bhutanese refugees, but not in an entirely positive way. With the solution of resettlement came troubling changes in the camp, suspicion of the relocation process, dissolution of families, and agitation from those who still advocated for repatriation. This article portrays one aspect of resettlement processing—the emotional—in the strategies, struggles, successes, and frustrations in relationships that refugees encounter in their everyday lives as they navigate the bureaucracies of forced migration.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Migration, Everyday Life, and Humanitarianism

More than a quarter century of empirical sociological research has shed light on immigrant integration and assimilation in the United States (Drouhot & Nee, 2019; Zhou & Gonzales, 2019). In American sociology, a significant focus of refugee research has been on integration experiences. Sociological studies of international migration tend to focus on labour flows to Western states rather than refugee movements between neighbour-

ing countries in the Global South (Chimni, 1998; FitzGerald & Arar, 2018). When sociologists examine refugees, it is often in the US in the context of resettlement. It analyzes the experience of refugees such as Vietnamese, Salvadorans, and Russian Jews within the assimilation paradigm, as it does with other immigrants (FitzGerald & Arar, 2018; Menjívar, 2000; Morawska, 2004; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). Foundational studies investigate linguistic, educational, economic, residential, and marital markers of integration (Alba & Nee, 2009). This study contributes to the literature on refugees' everyday lived experiences and interactions with officials while seeking resettlement.

Existing research on refugee resettlement often downplays the wider everyday life in which these decisions are made by instead focusing on the legal dynamics of determining refugee status (Kagan, 2002, 2006, 2010), the institutional structures of opportunity in resettlement (Nawyn, 2006, 2010), and experiences of integration and acquiring of citizenship after resettlement decisions (Bloemraad, 2006; Ong, 2003). However, law becomes part of everyday life in humanitarian contexts (Ewick & Silbey, 1998; Holzer, 2013, 2014; Jacobs & Kyamusugulwa, 2018; Merry, 2006). Resettlement processes are one of the main ways law enters everyday life in refugee camps (Warren, 2023). Like almost every aspect of daily refugee life, resettlement is subject to bureaucratic rules and regulations. Refugee camps are governed by an extensive system of rules and regulations derived from global humanitarian frameworks and procedures.

The fact that multiple normative frameworks govern humanitarian aid allows us to explore how international aid workers and their recipients—as major proponents of globalized social relations—use normative frameworks such as human rights, human-

itarian principles, and other standards to negotiate their identity, roles, status, and power positions (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2012, p. 892). The world of displacement, disaster, and humanitarian aid delivery is a complex one, fraught with major successes and catastrophic failures. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) oversees the protection of refugees and other displaced people globally. While it remains the most extensive bureaucracy dedicated to serving refugees, it is also vital to highlight challenges. The UNHCR lacks “proper mechanisms to incentivize countries to support more integration of refugees into host societies, or to open more refugee resettlement spots” (Gleichert, 2020, p. 139). This can lead to refugees becoming “stuck” in protracted displacement, in encampment, or with no permanent solution. The current duration of the world’s refugees in exile—made poignant in the case of the 5.9 million Palestinians living in continued displacement since 1949—demonstrates the UNHCR’s failure to successfully implement solutions (Gleichert, 2020; UNRWA, 2023).

Sociologists who study humanitarianism and development have criticized development aid for mostly failing to eliminate poverty or address the underlying power inequities it intends to overcome, demonstrating how organizational priorities, rather than on-the-ground needs, determine non-governmental organization efforts (Bob, 2005; Easterly & Easterly, 2006; Ferguson, 1994; Jackson, 2005; Krause, 2014; Li, 2007; Viterna & Robertson, 2015).

In 2005, Verdirame and Harrell-Bond strongly criticized international humanitarian response systems and the UNHCR, outlining organizational struggles and failures to protect refugees in crisis. Most notably, they coined the term “Janus-faced humanitarianism” to describe the “great disparity between the ‘face’ of humanitarian aid as

it is viewed by its donors and the ‘face’ of the same aid as seen by its beneficiaries” (Verdirame & Harrell-Bond, 2005, p. xvii). Migration officials tasked with granting or denying applications for refugee resettlement are one type of humanitarian in the bureaucracy of the international refugee protection regime. This type of bureaucracy is made possible through the day-to-day work of street-level bureaucrats who carry out policies and procedures (Lipsky, 2010). These street-level bureaucrats sometimes experience moral dilemmas between their obligations as civil servants implementing a policy and their emotions when confronted with tragic situations (Graham, 2002; Spire, 2020).

The Role of Emotions

Sociologists have long shown that micro-interactions are crucial to understanding institutional structures, but more recently, researchers have also begun to explore the power of emotions in this process (Pasquetti, 2013). Sociological studies have considered emotions in many realms, such as the “sociology of gender (Brody, 1999; Keith et al., 2015; Shields et al., 2006), work (Clay-Warner & Robinson, 2011; Grandey et al., 2013; Hochschild, 1975, 2003; Lively, 2006; Wharton, 2009), organizations (Fineman, 2009), social movements (Emirbayer & Goldberg, 2005; Flam & King, 2007; Jasper, 2011) and mass media (Döveling et al., 2010; Knottnerus, 2010)” (Bericat, 2016, p. 505). Other areas such as “health, law and justice, crime, politics, economy, consumption, leisure, religion, sport, and space (Brown, 2011; Greco & Stenner, 2008; Grossi, 2015; Nussbaum, 2009; Reckwitz, 2012; Stets & Turner, 2014) are also incorporating the analysis of affective structures and emotional dynamics” (Bericat, 2016, p. 505).

Scholars have conceptualized emotions as forces operating at the intersection of macro-structures and micro-interactions and sought to map “emotional climates” to ground the complex relationship between emotion and cognition within people’s historical and present-day predicaments (Barbalet, 1995; Collins, 2014; Scheff, 1990). As noted by Barbalet (1998, pp. 159–160).

Although climates are shared, individual participation in them will be patterned and, therefore, unequal. Emotional climates are group phenomena. Groups are structured by differences in role, capacity, power, and so on. It follows that the emotional experience of each member of the group, which will contribute to the overall climate, will be not only complementary but also distinct in terms of such things as differences in role and asymmetries of authority. An emotional climate is not a blanket which equally covers each member of the group associated with it. Each group member will contribute differently to the formation of the climate and will experience it in terms of their particular place in the group.

Drawing on Barbalet’s concept of emotional climates, this work investigates the emotional climate of resettlement processing experienced by refugees seeking resettlement and migration officials tasked with the final determination of resettlement cases.

METHODS

Study Design and Setting

This project draws on a cumulative total of 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Nepal, within the two remaining Bhutanese refugee camps located in the easternmost district of Jhapa, with ethnographic and participant observations conducted in the nearby town of Damak and the capital city of Kathmandu. The specifics of everyday life were crucial to understanding encampment in Nepal, the transnational bureaucracies of forced migration, and the paths of resettlement refugees take.

I spent a great deal of time in community with refugees who were willing to share their stories. I attended various social functions and religious programs, shared meals, learned popular songs and dances, and showed up in many capacities not explicitly related to this research. The Bhutanese Refugee Charitable Education Program was also instrumental throughout my fieldwork in facilitating both my access to the camp and providing ongoing support through mentorship, hospitality, volunteer opportunities, moral support, professional guidance, and friendship. Building a relationship of trust takes time. Given that sociological analysis is often critical, trust can readily turn into betrayal (Rochford, 2014). My participation in community events was important for refugees to learn about me and my research and hold me accountable to the community, an element seen as necessary practice specifically for non-native researchers, who need to be openly accountable (Gurr, 2011; Kahakalau, 2004; L. T. Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

Long-term ethnographic fieldwork allows for the development of deep relationships and rapport with research participants. These connections allowed participants in this study to openly address difficulties, questions, and concerns regarding my research, findings, or motivations. I acknowledge that true objectivity is impossible and human interests orient all human inquiry. Therefore, all inquiry is located in specific cultural and historical contexts, where commonsensical frameworks of understanding shape scientific data collection, interpretation, and description (Harding, 1991). As a non-native researcher with the freedom to move across borders, I recognize the power differences in my position. I sought to reduce them by sharing my findings, research reflections, ideas, and hypotheses with my participants in real time. Attention to the issues of insiders and out-

siders is also crucial for any research project (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). As an American academic, I carried into the field socialization from the academy that informed my position as a researcher and each element of data collection from gaining access to the field through data analysis.

Study Participants

The research received institutional review board approval from the University of Connecticut and permission from the UNHCR between 2014 and 2016. Participants were individuals 18 years and older residing, working, volunteering in, or visiting Nepal's Sanishare and Beldangi Bhutanese refugee camps in 2014–2016. The two main groups of participants were individuals who self-identified as refugees or migration officials. **Migration official** is an umbrella term used to refer to anyone working in the administration of the camps or involved in resettlement processing. This includes international and national staff of various agencies, organizations, and governments. All participants and local organizations were assigned pseudonyms.

Data Collection and Analysis

Ethnographic field notes were collected on daily life in the camps through participant observation of various activities, interactions, performances, protests, workshops, life events, political uprisings, and conversations. Hundreds of hours of fieldwork culminated in daily field notes. All data were collected as handwritten field notes in diaries or audio-recorded reflections transcribed and coded for themes. Ethnographic observations were conducted in both Sanishare and Beldangi refugee camps, the local town of Damak, and UNHCR and International Organization for Migration facilities.

Field notes were coded using an iterative analytical process, with codes assigned and

then refined upon multiple examinations of the data. Throughout the coding process, the project was informed by elements of institutional ethnography, particularly the conceptualization of ruling relations. D. E. Smith (1999) argues that the institutional forces by which our lives are organized constitute relationships that "rule," which shape access to resources, subjective experiences, and our understanding of these experiences. This methodology was used to conceptualize the ruling relations of refugee encampment and the lived experience of navigating the various bureaucracies of forced migration. The use of institutional ethnography retains the subjectivity of participants while allowing examination of the mechanisms by which individuals' local "everyday/every-night" world is shaped and coordinated extra-locally through institutionally organized social relations (D. E. Smith, 1999). The structures of refugee encampment "rule" the everyday life of refugees. However,

it is wrong to think that the experience of being displaced, living under external protection, lacking day-to-day security, experiencing uncertainty about the future, concern about family and friends, poor health, lack of reliable information about home, all of which are common to the refugee experience, undermine autonomous agency altogether.

(Mackenzie et al., 2007, p. 310)

Understanding the relationships and interactions between refugees and the institutions that govern them centres the refugee experiences and sheds light on those institutional practices.

FINDINGS

By approaching encounters between refugees and USCIS officers during ceremonial visits as sites of emotional exchange, this research better grasps the socio-political dynamics between refugees and the officials de-

termining their resettlement cases. Through an in-depth ethnographic analysis of the distinct emotional climate of resettlement processing, this case reveals the following: (a) how refugees and migration officials experience the emotional climate of resettlement processing, (b) the emotional costs borne by refugees, and (c) the emotional tactics of the USCIS officers.

Stage Fright: The Emotional Costs of Staging “the Good Refugee” for Official Consumption

When I arrived at the Spoken Language Center a little after 9:00 a.m., the three morning classes that serve around 35 students had already started. The director of education, Sudeep, informed me that the USCIS team was visiting camp today. He asked about the day’s attendance and instructed the teachers to create a program for the visitors and combine all classes. Everyone was eager to know who our visitors were. As I began explaining that they were Americans from the US government, several learners whispered to each other that it would be the USCIS team. Many physically drew themselves inwards on their mats, their eyes darting around to see if the team had arrived. There were no volunteers to do the demonstration Sudeep had created. Any other day, when a vehicle arrived, learners would gather in the doorways of the classrooms to greet whoever was coming. However, today, the learners physically tensed up when they heard a vehicle approaching. Learners near the wall drew their shoulders in, hunching over and peeking through the slats in the bamboo wall. Several others took deep breaths. In the corner, a small group of older women whispered among themselves. I heard “dar lagyo [I’m afraid].” The news of the USCIS visit palpably changed the classroom envi-

ronment as fear and anxiety rippled through the classroom.

Learners expressed fear in their whispered conversations; their body language noticeably changed—when they had been lively and ready for a typical day of class just moments before, they now had slumped shoulders and darting eyes. Being subjected to the ceremonial USCIS visit made refugees fearful and anxious, in part because it made them think about their upcoming high-stakes resettlement interviews. The stress and fear associated with resettlement processing surfaced repeatedly throughout my fieldwork. Several months earlier, Bikash, a refugee employee with the education program, told me, “I have been waiting eight years. The stress is part of my life now” (field note, September 2015). Another refugee woman, when talking about her upcoming interview date, told me, “I am happy to have my date for the interview, but I’m so worried to tell it right” (field note, February 2016).

The uncertainty surrounding these final resettlement interviews exacerbated anxieties. Many refugees believed any interactions with migration officials might become a crucial part of the ultimate determination of their case. “[The USCIS officers] have all of the power to send you or keep you here; of course, we are afraid,” Sabina, one of the refugee teachers, told me later (field note, March 2016). Whether this holds true in the actual interviews, there are real emotional consequences of these (mis)perceptions of power and influence in resettlement processing. These staged presentations of refugees for official consumption exemplified and exacerbated the fear and anxiety that made up the emotional climate of resettlement processing for those seeking refuge.

When the USCIS team arrived, we had a full classroom of around 35 students, four Spoken English program staff members, our

director, a Nepali UNHCR tour guide, and a Nepali interpreter from UNHCR. Everyone watched as all 13 members of the USCIS team filed into the small bamboo classroom. Prompted by Sudeep, students began the demonstration with introductions. Every student who spoke went through the exact introduction formula: name, age, former residence in Bhutan, current residence in the refugee camp, family size, identification as an English learner, and a thank you. As introductions began, two learners in the back whispered that they did not want to say their names out loud because the USCIS team might remember them during the interview.

As they listened, some USCIS officers had smiles on their faces, seemingly amused by the learners. However, even those who started with smiles seemed quickly bored of the introductions and the subsequent demonstrations of English proficiency through long lists of body parts, fruits, and vegetables. Most officers started fidgeting with their hands and staring at their shoes or off into the distance. One officer stared at their smartphone. At one point, Sabina whispered in my ear, "Kasto uptaro lagcha [how uncomfortable]," and she laughed nervously. I smiled at her, and we kept watching the program.

The primary emotions refugees experienced in these interactions were fear, considerable anxiety, and embarrassment. Refugees were inconvenienced and made uncomfortable by the visits but tried their best to perform as "good" refugees. Meanwhile, the primary emotion displayed by migration officials was ambivalent compassion, with noted discomfort, deceit, and ambivalence. The following section shows how USCIS officers engage with these elusive yet normative expectations of "good" refugees.

Interpreting Refugee Performances: The Right Way to Be a "Good" Refugee

After the refugees' demonstrations, the director invited officials to tell the learners about their hometowns in the United States. Raj, one of the oldest refugee learners in the class, moved to the front row with his phone, recording the officials' responses. Several refugees were laughing under their breath and pointing Raj out to each other. Finally noticing the recording, one of the USCIS officers beside me looked at Raj with eyebrows arched and a crooked smile and uttered, "Wow." When they finished, Sudeep invited the learners to ask questions. After an awkward silence, Raj stood up, still recording, and broke the ice with the first question in his polite English:

Dear respected guests, honoured members, and fellow learners, Namaste and good morning. I am here to ask one question about going for the resettlement. I simply would like to have the knowledge of how are the US cities and cities of other country and which one we should go for, thank you dear respected guests.

As Raj talked, one of the officers whispered to his companion too quietly for the learners to hear, "Oh this guy is bold, he's good, this guy is going to pass."

Nothing within any international covenant, code, convention, or law states bravery, politeness, or a sense of boldness justifies granting resettlement. In fact, a "well-founded fear of persecution" ([United Nations General Assembly, 1951](#), art. 1) is the basis for granting refugee status, and all procedures of resettlement or integration that follow from establishing such a fear. Yet here, as the USCIS officers share a joke "backstage," we glimpse how complex human emotions may filter into the supposedly "pure" legal criteria of resettlement determination. The offhand comment that Raj's bravery signals

that this refugee “is going to pass” is important because it illuminates how things other than official legal criteria may feature in the interactions that make up resettlement processing. What is more, it suggests there are good or at least more appropriate ways to be a refugee in the minds of USCIS officers, something refugees already suspected and that provoked much of their fear and anxiety. Scholarship has shown that institutional discretion is a potent force and that material constraints and the values, stereotypes, and assumptions about clients ultimately exert pressure on bureaucrats (Fassin, 2011; Graham, 2002; Rousseau et al., 2002; Saltsman, 2014). A sense of confidence or ability to articulate themselves may provide refugees advantages in the resettlement process. However, that would mean those who fear the USCIS officers may have a compounded disadvantage when they go before them for their final interviews. In short, it reveals a tacit emotional script refugees may be held to while seeking refuge and resettlement. In the next section, I will discuss the contradictory ways USCIS officers interact with refugees publicly and discuss them backstage.

Performing Compassion as an Authority Figure: Compassionate Deception

A USCIS officer, Laura, responded to Raj’s question about cities abroad by discussing how great Manhattan is. Other officers followed with a plug for southern California, excitedly gesturing while talking about grand American landscapes. Six or seven other USCIS officers added their encouragement. Finally, Laura retook the floor: “Please come, come to the US. We want you. Australia is trying to take you all. All cities are great cities. America is wonderful, everywhere is a great opportunity!”

Manhattan and southern California are places that rarely receive Bhutanese refugees. Instead, most Bhutanese refugee resettlement occurs in middle America or counties outside major metropolitan areas like Manhattan. In fact, the USCIS officers knew this and joked about it in a conversation I had with them earlier that week during an informal dinner in the nearby town where they were staying: “Not everybody gets the milk and honey; some of these places are real shit cities, you know, like Nebraska and Fargo. [The entire table bursts with laughter.] It’s hard being a refugee—like, what do they expect?”

How can one reconcile the jokes about how the refugees get the “shit cities” with the officers’ performances during the ceremonial visit to the language centre? Why would the USCIS team offer refugees such an elaborate performance with their welcoming and compassionate words and unwavering public support for coming to America? Why acknowledge only in private the difficulties of resettling in the United States? These public platitudes and the callous backstage humour are strategies USCIS officers use to cope with a difficult emotional climate. The emotional climate of resettlement processing can be incredibly dark and upsetting; USCIS officers are tasked with making, in the most extreme cases, a life-or-death decision or, at least, a decision that means the difference made by immediate and enormous improvements in quality of life and opportunity for someone. What they do is emotionally taxing. Authority figures in different emotional climates may use other emotional tactics to manage comparable emotions. Judges, for example, often assume a remote or stern demeanour to manage such challenges; police officers, on the other hand, can act contemptuous or cold. USCIS officers expressed their authority through

compassionate platitudes offered to quell refugee anxiety about resettlement. They embraced what other scholars have identified as the driving normative framework of humanitarianism: compassion (Fassin, 2012).

The “backstage” conversation illustrates how officials practise and affirm for each other another emotional tactic: distancing. The “what do they expect?” comment allows officials to collectively shift any shame about misrepresenting the US resettlement process back onto the refugee, thereby alleviating any discomfort felt for being disingenuous about what to expect from the resettlement process. The consequence of these complex emotional dynamics in the socio-political relationships between refugees and USCIS officers is the emergence of a Janus-faced bureaucrat who performs compassion publicly in ceremonial visits and uses dark humour and callousness to distance themselves emotionally in private. Of course, refugees did not see officials’ complex backstage emotions; they only saw the compassion performed during the camp visit. Nevertheless, these public displays of compassion do have limits. As we will see in the next section, USCIS officers restrict compassion in certain situations and elsewhere deploy alternative emotional tactics that more openly enforce and maintain the power differential between themselves and refugees.

The Truth and Nothing But: How Authority Figures Impress a “Correct” Way of Truth-Telling

One refugee learner spoke up:

I have a question about the process and the interview. I had heard that if you do not tell the exact same story, then you will get denied. I am old, and my mind is old; if I forget one detail, I am scared I will not be back with my family. Can you tell us how to manage this in the interview?

Listening to the translation, Mark whispered to his fellow officer, “Oh, you wish we would tell you how to get through the interview,” to which Phil replied, “Wouldn’t that be nice.” Mark added, “Can’t help ya there, lady.” Another official on the bench up front said loudly to the USCIS team leader, “Well, Nicole, that’s why you make the big bucks. Why don’t you take this question?” The leader responded:

Okay yeah, of course everyone is a bit worried about the interview. We, we here, we are the ones who make the final decisions. If something so bad happened, you will not forget it. If it is the truth, you will not forget it and the stories will match.

As her response was translated, a hush came over the room, and visible shifts in body language created a palpably tense feeling.

A mumbled exchange between Mark and Phil continued: “Great, and they see us as the assholes who decide.” Sudeep, the director, scanned the crowd, seeming to note the tension: “Okay, guys if there are not any other questions, and I think we’ve taken enough of our guests’ time, so thank you very much for coming, and we will move on to our next stop on the tour.” As the USCIS team left the classroom, the learners stood up to say goodbye. The USCIS team leader said, “Good luck, everyone.” A few of the other officers chimed in with “good luck” and “thank you” as they left.

Later, I asked Sabina for her thoughts about the visit, particularly the answer to the question about the interview process. She said,

I don’t know. I guess she [USCIS team leader] has a point. You have to tell the truth, and if you tell the truth, the stories are the same, but I don’t think that was the question. I think people are worried about the process and the details. They’re not lying, so they’re not worried about lying, but they’re scared about the process.

USCIS officers publicly construct truth as repeatedly recounting verbatim one’s life

history. However, if “truth” were so easily made—if it were that simple to determine refugee resettlement—there would be no need for official discretion or personal judgment, no real professional challenges in gatekeeping, and therefore, few emotional costs for the USCIS gatekeepers. Instead, the USCIS team leader was publicly dismissive, while the other officials fell back on backstage callousness to manage their discomfort. These two emotional tactics allow them to continue to work in the face of the rigid limits of their competency and authority. In reality, ceremonial visits to refugee camps cannot give USCIS officials meaningful contextual details to use in the interview process. The backstage conversation shows they recognize their role as gatekeepers; as the conversation between Mark and Phil shows, they have a sense of how powerful they are in the eyes of the refugees, and it does not give them pleasure but rather discomfort. These emotional tactics ultimately reinforce a single “right way” to be a refugee, and one narrow type of “truth” perpetuates the profoundly ingrained power differential between USCIS officers and refugees.

Once the officers left the classroom, there were a lot of murmured conversations. I asked a few people how they felt about the visit. Some said they felt scared or uncomfortable: “I didn’t want to say my name; my interview is tomorrow,” said one of the older women. One of the men in the class told me he “felt small” in the presence of the officials. A few said they felt nothing; some even said they felt happy, but the majority relayed that it was an unpleasant ordeal. Afterwards, I asked Sabina how she thought the visit went for the class, and she had the same sense. She said,

They were scared. They were terrified. It’s good that they get to talk to the officers, but those people make the decision for the rest of their lives, our lives. Of course, they want some information,

but most of them were very scared and didn’t even want to speak their names.

Refugees are acutely aware of the power imbalance between them and USCIS officers, which engenders fear, anxiety, and embarrassment and ultimately serves as the foundation for the shared but unequal emotional climate present in resettlement processing. In this case, efforts to manage this fear by publicly questioning resettlement policies or requesting more detailed instructions on being a “good” refugee were dismissed publicly and mocked privately. Then, after all the fear, the anxious scrambling, and the embarrassing performance, the refugees were sent home with no debriefing. The visit did nothing to further refugees’ understanding of the resettlement process and instead exacted the emotional cost of additional fear and anxiety surrounding the interview and resettlement process.

For USCIS officers, the ceremonial visit ends differently. They feel good about it. As everyone exited the classroom, Mark commented, “This is the first time I’ve been in a refugee camp. It’s intense. I’m enjoying it.” Even after the last fraught emotional exchange, which left the USCIS officers momentarily uncomfortable, they can easily step out of the emotional climate, moving on to the next stop of their tour. This is the power differential; they have the power to physically and emotionally leave without thinking about the aftermath.

At home in the United States, the USCIS team members are mid-level bureaucrats who, through the ordinary office work of filing papers, writing reports, and processing interviews, help enact a complex rational–legal system of classifying people into refugees and non-refugees. However, in refugee camps, they appear as foreign dignitaries with immense power over refugee futures. Many refugees fear that interacting with a USCIS officer carries the risk of their

making a wrong impression that could undermine their cases. Most prefer to avoid them. However, when USCIS officers come to camp on these routine ceremonial visits, refugees are forced to publicly enact their "refugee-ness" for official consumption, much to their embarrassment and anxiety. USCIS officers' ability to seamlessly move in and out of camp settings sets refugees' position in stark relief, factoring into the emotional imbalance present in their interactions.

Nevertheless, the USCIS officers' emotional experience is made complex by the real constraints on official authority, leaving them relatively powerless to address refugee concerns. The complexity of resettlement decision-making fosters an emotional disconnect between the practitioners and the processes they execute. It manifests as discomfort, ambivalence, and sometimes deceit, ultimately undercutting the compassion that humanitarian actors publicly espouse and many personally feel towards refugees.

These findings shed light on the complex dynamics of the emotional climate for resettlement processing by highlighting emotional exchanges and power imbalances during USCIS officers' ceremonial refugee camp visits. During these visits, refugees were forced to perform their refugee identities for officials, which was emotionally draining and disruptive to their daily learning. In addition, USCIS officers' backstage conversations revealed that while there is no requirement for bravery or poise in resettlement processing and interviewing, such expectations may find their way into decisions about refugees' migration trajectories. Finally, while USCIS officers are aware of the limitations of resettlement, they were found to present distinctly different perspectives on these opportunities depending on whether they are in or out of reach of refugees' ears; I call

this compassionate deception. Ceremonial camp visits reproduced power differentials between refugees and migration officials found broadly within the refugee protection regime. USCIS officers and refugees ultimately have separate and unequal experiences within the emotional climate of resettlement processing with often contradictory emotions.

DISCUSSION

The USCIS officers' ceremonial visit to the Beldangi refugee camp provided a unique opportunity to investigate the encounters between refugees and officials that make up resettlement as everyday life. The analysis revealed complex socio-political emotional exchanges of power and vulnerability that underpin the ostensibly rule-bound, rational-legal resettlement system. Refugees and migration officials experience the emotional climate of resettlement processing in separate and unequal ways, resulting in an emotional cost borne by refugees.

These emotional exchanges maintain the deeply entrenched power differential between USCIS officers and refugees while exacting high emotional costs on refugees. The officials' privilege to enter the camp as voyeurs reifies (consciously or not) the power imbalances between refugee and migration officials. These power imbalances demonstrate how refugee determination systems worldwide can be complex, unfair, and informed by nationalistic thinking about who is and who is not a legitimate refugee (Fobear, 2014; Matas, 2001).

During ceremonial camp visits, refugees were used as props to showcase the success of the humanitarian program, a well-documented concern with humanitarian spectacles of all kinds (de Waal, 2008; Holzer & Warren, 2015). While not wholly coercive—there is no official requirement for refu-

gees to perform for visiting bureaucrats or officials—the Nepali director of English programming sought to impress the USCIS team by having the refugee learners perform on demand for the visitors, despite their visible discomfort. Even though the visits disrupted their learning and refugees were reluctant to perform in the demonstration, the director persisted. He was operating on the understanding that the USCIS team wanted these refugee performances, but using refugees as props exacted the emotional costs of fear and anxiety.

“Refugee-ness,” first explored by [Lisa Malkki \(1992\)](#) as a way of highlighting the complexities of living under the label of refugee, is now also understood as “a social construction of what is considered to be typical for people labeled as refugees” ([Szczepanikova, 2010](#), p. 473). This construction evolves and varies depending on the beholders and performers. Refugee-ness is not a pre-defined set of psychological or social characteristics. It is continually re-created and performed in social interactions ([Szczepanikova, 2010](#), p. 473). Refugees subjected to impromptu ceremonial visits had to perform their refugee-ness for USCIS officers. My witnessing of the backstage conversation between officials revealed that, while not codified in legal doctrine, expectations about the proper way to be a refugee factor into their decisions about migration trajectories. The pressure to perform and the fear of interacting with officials exacted an emotional toll on refugees.

The construction of international borders has created complex and, at times, contradictory transnational processes for people fleeing from conflict or disaster. A global governance system coupled with regional political dynamics and local ethnic disputes classifies some people but not others as “refugees,” allowing them to interact with migration officials.

Meanwhile, foreign immigration officials must represent their national resettlement regime and uphold the international standards of a well-founded fear that justifies the label “refugee.” These officials are street-level bureaucrats with immense power over refugees in the international refugee protection regime. The emotional tactics deployed by USCIS officers foster the “Janus-faced bureaucrat.” In popular culture, “Janus-faced” connotes a dishonest or duplicitous person, but in fact, the term derives from Janus, the two-faced deity from Roman mythology, who was the god of thresholds and transitions as well as war and peace; his two faces let him look into both the past and the future. USCIS officers stand Janus-like at a life-defining threshold for refugees, looking into each person’s war-torn past to imagine a peaceful future.

Today, a majority of the Bhutanese refugees have resettled in the US, and many studies examine their integration relating to employment, education, and health ([Capps et al., 2015](#); [Griffiths & Loy, 2019](#); [Lewis, 2021](#); [Roka, 2017](#); [Shrestha, 2015](#); [Sriram, 2020](#)). Notably, high levels of mental distress and suicide have led to research on Bhutanese integration focusing on mental health risks, including etiology, risk factors, and health care access ([Ao et al., 2012, 2016](#); [Subedi et al., 2015](#); [Yun et al., 2016](#)).

While scholarship focuses overwhelmingly on the challenges Bhutanese refugees face, it is important to note their vibrant ethnic community organizations across the globe that provide support, solidarity, and community to society at large. Interspersed among stories of isolation, suicide, and desperation are Bhutanese refugees’ success stories of integration and assimilation with the broader society, as well as many reports of Bhutanese refugees being happy to have resettled in the

US, citing opportunities for younger generations (Roka, 2017).

Scholars demand better solutions and more attention to address refugees' struggles in integration and adaptation (Griffiths & Loy, 2019; Lewis, 2021; Naseh et al., 2022; Parajuli & Horey, 2022; Poudel-Tandukar et al., 2020; Roka, 2017). It is prudent to uptake similar approaches to understand migration officials' impact in refugee camps; more research is needed to understand possible connections between encampment and resettlement in terms of interactions with officials and relatively low integration rates.

Limitations

The present study provides an analysis of the experiences of Bhutanese refugees as they navigate the bureaucratic complexities of forced migration during a two-year period towards the end of the resettlement process. However, it is important to note that the study's scope is restricted by the absence of data from the initial stages of the process as well as longitudinal data on the camp visits. Furthermore, the available data are constrained to ethnographic research conducted within the camps and lacks follow-up with the participants who were resettled after the study. One limitation of ethnographic research is limited generalizability. While acknowledging this limitation, conducting ethnographic research in a particular refugee camp can provide a valuable foundation for subsequent research endeavours by offering comprehensive perspectives into refugees' daily lives, experiences, and cultural practices in that particular setting. These insights can help to generate hypotheses or theories that can be tested in subsequent studies and inform the development of more culturally appropriate and effective interventions and policies for refugee populations.

CONCLUSION

This research, focused on encampment experiences, asks how refugees navigate the bureaucracy of forced migration. The process of encampment and the bureaucratic governance of forced migration became everyday life, with impromptu interactions with migration officials resulting in emotional consequences that reflect global power imbalances between parties in forced migration processing. Drawing from ethnographic field notes of a ceremonial refugee camp visit by USCIS officers, this study has examined the emotional impact these visits have on refugees and officials. In addition, I have investigated the micro-level power relations between refugees and officials in the international refugee protection regime, revealing the separate and unequal experiences of the emotional climate of resettlement processing, the emotional costs incurred by refugees, and the emotional tactics of the USCIS officers—"Janus-faced bureaucrats."

The overarching goal is to illustrate how these global historical-institutional processes manifest as micro-interactions between refugees and migration officials. This study adds to the scholarship on the sociology of emotions and scholarship on the daily lives of refugees and displaced people. Contributions emphasize the nuances of everyday lived experiences and interactions with officials while seeking resettlement. The ceremonial visit revealed both the emotional tactics used by officials and the consequences for refugees. The two major groups involved in resettlement processing, refugees and migration officials, ultimately held few shared emotions. For those seeking refuge, the emotional climate was dominated by fear, anxiety, and embarrassment, while for USCIS officers, it was dominated by compassion, discomfort, deceit, and ambivalence. As a result, USCIS officers and refugees ultimately

have separate and unequal emotional experiences, often in contradiction.

Ceremonial visits by migration officials to the refugee camp cannot provide unbiased contextual details to use in the interview process. The backstage conversation among USCIS officers shows they recognize their role as gatekeepers, and they have a sense of how powerful they are in the eyes of the refugees. Officials and refugees report feeling discomfort during the process. These ceremonial camp visits are not necessary and cause refugees undue emotional harm. USCIS officers should refrain from conducting unscheduled visits to refugee camps as a standard protocol, particularly in instances where the possibility exists of encountering individuals who are scheduled to undergo resettlement status interviews.

If it is determined that these visits are essential for providing context to the officers for their duties, they should be carried out in a neutral environment and attended by refugees on a voluntary basis. The implementation of such measures could potentially mitigate the psychological distress and adverse experiences encountered by refugees in a manner considerate of their dignity. USCIS officers should collaborate with trusted community members or NGOs to aid in the facilitation of these visits and ensure that refugees are fully informed of their purpose and potential outcomes. By adopting this approach, immigration authorities can build trust with refugees and promote a more collaborative and humane approach to refugee protection. Future research is needed to investigate how emotional exchanges play out in the lives of migrants and refugees worldwide. Understanding the power dynamics and emotional costs of these interactions will benefit practitioners on the ground, potentially reducing the emotional toll exacted on refugees.

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