

THE SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FORCED MIGRATION

A Multi-Media Educational Tool

Winter 2021

Labels and Media Framing: “Refugee” and “Migrant”

Target audience: high school (grades 9-12)

Keywords: media, refugee, terminology

Research by Naima Nader (Vassar College)

“Refugee” and “migrant” are socially (and legally) constructed categories rather than “natural” states of being for human beings. The legal category of refugee was created under the 1951 Geneva Convention, with the purpose of granting international protection to those fleeing persecution. In popular understanding, a refugee is someone who was forced to flee, whereas a migrant is someone who crosses national state borders to improve their economic situation, for example. Yet if we take a closer look, we realize these two categories are not radically different after all. In this section I show the importance of these labels’ effects on our thinking, and question whether or not the distinction between refugee and migrant is natural.

THE WORDS WE USE

Patrick Bahner, interview with Elisabeth Wehling, “[How Words Influence Our Thinking](#),” Goethe Institut, October 2016

- “Does whether we talk about “refugees” or “people who have fled their homes” alter the discourse? How do words and phrasing shape our thinking? What is the significance of language in political debates?”

Rebecca Solnit, “[Words Can Kill: Haiti and the Vocabulary of Disaster](#),” in *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis*, edited by Geoffrey Batchen, Mick Gidley, Nancy K. Miller and Jay Prosser (2012)

- “We live and die by words and ideas, and it matters desperately that we get them right.”
- Elisabeth Wehling and Rebecca Solnit both underline the significance of words in political and media discourse. Wehling explains that when we use the term “refugee” we are “ignoring their reason for fleeing, both linguistically and

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conceptually.” “People who have fled their homes” on the other hand conjures a different image, perhaps one that can evoke compassion.

Immigrant Alphabet, Al-Bustan (digital exhibition)

- **Immigrant:** “someone who migrates from one country to another to start a new page of their life”
- **Refugee:** “someone who is running away legally or illegally to better themselves or their family”

This exhibition humanizes the terms used to talk about the movement of persons across national borders by keeping their definitions of immigrant and refugee in simple language that touches the heart of the issue— at the end of the day, a refugee and an immigrant are just two people who have left their home and who are hoping for a better situation elsewhere.

MEDIA FRAMING

Andrea Lawlor and Erin Tolley, “Deciding Who’s Legitimate: News Media Framing of Immigrants and Refugees,” *International Journal of Communication* Vol. 11 (2017)

Dimitra L. Milioni, Lia-Paschalia Spyridou and Konstantinos Vadratsikas, “Framing Immigration in Online Media and Television News in Crisis-stricken Cyprus,” *Cyprus Review* (January 2015)

Jan Detering, “Populism in Europe: Radical Framing Wins,” *The New Federalist*, September 28, 2018

Here I bring to your attention how framing further influences our thinking on refugees and migrants through examples in the international press from Canada to Cyprus. Frames have a selective function, so they make us look at a topic from a certain angle. In their study, Lawlor and Tolley investigate which frames the Canadian media uses to talk about refugees and immigrants. For example, they found that the frame of ‘validity’ is more often applied to refugees than migrants, and that for economic framing the opposite was true. They come to the conclusion that “differences in the volume, framing, and tone of media coverage suggest that immigrants and refugees were perceived as substantively different from one

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another.” But are refugees and immigrants that different from each other? The lines are definitely blurred.

NEW SYSTEMS OF EXCLUSION

Marta Bivand Erdal and Ceri Oeppen, [“Forced to leave? The discursive and analytical significance of describing migration as forced and voluntary,”](#) *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* Vol. 44 (2018)

Stephan Scheel, Glenda Garelli and Martina Tazzioli, “Politics of Protection” in [“New Keywords: Migration and Borders,”](#) *Cultural Studies* Vol. 29, (2014)

Lama Mourad and Kelsey P. Norman, [“Transforming refugees into migrants: institutional change and the politics of international protection,”](#) *European Journal of International Relations*, November 6, 2019

Khalid Koser, [“Time to reform the international refugee regime,”](#) Oxford University Press Blog, September 21, 2015

Heaven Crawley and Dimitris Skleparis, [“Refugees, migrants, neither, both: categorical fetishism and the politics of bounding in Europe’s ‘migration crisis,’”](#) *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* Vol. 44 (2018)

Finally, I wanted to take a critical look at the distinction between “migrant” and “refugee.” It has become increasingly harder to access the status of refugee, all the while the number of refugees around the world has not been declining (see section titled “Counting Forced Migrants: Methods, Impact, and Improvements”).

Supposedly refugees are “forced” to migrate whereas migrants do so “voluntarily.” In their paper, Erdal and Oeppen look at the significance of describing migration as forced or voluntary. They think about what makes an action voluntary— for example, if there are no good alternatives, then in which respect is an immigrant’s decision to leave their country really voluntary?

While these questions are important, I believe the best way to understand the depth and complexity of the factors that motivate people to leave or to stay in their home is to hear it from those who have experienced it. There are many sources written by

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people who have fled their homes themselves in the sections “Finding Voice through Theatre: Forced Migration and Self-Expression” and “Literature of Displacement.”