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## The Organization of people in distress: Unprogrammed, unintended and unstructured consequences for refugee women



Denise Shelley Newnham

*Glion Institute of Higher Education, Bulle, Switzerland*

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### ABSTRACT

The history of people fleeing civil wars and economic disasters reached its peak in 2015 when over a million people sought asylum in European countries, thereby accentuating organizational inconsistencies with previous measures adopted towards people seeking asylum or having obtained provisional refuge. Increasingly complex and malleable organizational structures are fraught with a climate of deep organizational incoherence. In Switzerland, a significant number of people still reside on an F permit which does not allow them to find employment or to choose their place of residence. Relying on an adaptation of the Change Laboratory method, the Wild Laboratory, this study focused on facilitating five refugee women's recognition of laws that had maintained them in a liminal state for periods ranging from 8 to 15 years. Recognition of these rules enabled them to find new ways of making sense of their socio-cultural environment. The results provide evidence that more rapid and humanitarian organizational and bureaucratic measures need to be implemented with refugee populations. All ethical considerations were undertaken to avoid creating psychological or physical harm to the participants and the wider community.

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### 1. Introduction

“Refugees live in a divided world, between countries in which they cannot live, and countries which they may not enter” (Moorehead, 2005, p.3).

More than a million people, seeking asylum, crossed into Europe in 2015. The numbers of people seeking asylum in October 2016 remain consistent with those of 2015 (UNHCR, 2007). After 75 years of experience in such matters it would appear that organizations created to deal with such issues would have found some form of coherence (Williams & Mekada, 2014, p. i1). Instead the “migration crisis has spread images of suffering, courage, and intolerance. It has strained the unity of the European Union, sparked debate about the difference between Western and Eastern Europe, and posed difficult questions about global inequality” (Dragostinova, 2016 p. 1). The consequences of ways of organizing people in distress have become increasingly complex and necessitate further investigation (Williams & Mekada, 2014).

The concept of organization has been extensively researched in sociology yet remains open for further discussion. However, certain conventions have been established in order to stabilize meaning and human sense making. The concept, simply put, refers to a rather stable unit of people engaged in common interest activities targeting relative objectives (Bittner, 1965/2013).

E-mail address: [Deniseshelleynewnham1@gmail.com](mailto:Deniseshelleynewnham1@gmail.com).

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Thompson (2003), more recently added that human persons will belong to systems of several organizations at once thereby dissolving boundaries and material products, meaning that unitary authority systems will no longer exist. Such instantiations appear problematic as it denies the core characteristic of human need to organize human behaviour. The organization of people in distress, in particular those seeking refuge, is complex (see the following section) as organizations are divided between humanitarian and political postulations that question boundaries and legitimacy. Legitimacy is a contested issue within organizations dealing with refugees. The most accepted position adopted by both private and public sections is control of the others rights through subjugation. Goffman, as far back as 1961 (Goffman, 1961), purported that organizations that “control an unwilling client group must define their clients as defective to justify authority over them. An entrance is prima facie evidence that one must be the kind of person that the institution was set up to handle” (p. 84). A refugee person must be in need of refuge under defined conditions and accept the rules of the benevolent organization. This way of making sense of human behaviour fulfils a human need of structural space away from the horrors of civil war but as well produces inconsistencies or contradictions between various aims and objectives, values and morals. The rules of the organization are respected but the socio-affective dispositions; appropriate aspirations, motivations and values (Bernstein, 2000), of the refugee person are, to a large extent, neglected. Due to such variations, Bittner (1965/2013) set out to understand how organizations describe how they function and what forms of unintended and unprogrammed structures are active, that is to say, informal structures that adhere to the formal structured programmes of actions. It appears evident that organizations dealing with human beings in distress are primarily there for humanitarian reasons; however, many situations indicate that it is rather the political regulation aspect that is dominant. This focus on dealing with refugee people is unprogrammed and unintended but none the less ignores the fact that 50% of all migrants globally are women and are of a reproductive age. This makes them very vulnerable to economic exploitation and sexual abuse. Young mothers traveling alone with small children are as well harassed, abused and traumatised along their journey (Williams & Mekada, 2014) the consequences of which, during resettlement, are seldom dealt with. The young women or mothers are left to deal with their past in their own way and this often collides with rules and regulations of the organizational system which is perceived as a further aggression.

This paper will discuss the results of unintended, unprogrammed and informal structures within political organizations, in particular those of Switzerland, when dealing with the lives of refugee populations. Political membership refers to those principles and practices “for incorporating aliens and strangers, immigrants and newcomers, refugees and asylum seekers, into existing polities” (Benhabib, 2006). This paper sets out to demonstrate how, despite modern social evolutions and expanding systems with reduced boundaries and forms of authority, bureaucracy (Du Gay, 2000) in complex organizations remains a vehicle of organizational power, its sickle and due to this, refugee populations become forgotten people whose human rights become ignored over extended periods of time. The research questioned whether the mothers’ would be able to recognize the social and political rules of the region; it questioned whether they would then make the connection between these rules and their present condition and lastly whether they would be able to create a new social space that did not contain former loss of values, motives and aspirations. The articulation of these questions will be illustrated through the quest of five refugee mothers, residing on an F permit (provisional) for 8 to 15 years in a geographical area of Switzerland, to overcome their solitude and socio-cultural incoherence. This process was facilitated through the use of an adapted form of The Change Laboratory (Engeström, 1987/2015).

Williams and Mekada (2014) argue that social evolution has led to new dangers and needs for people in distress. “Historically, human populations have migrated to different countries following long-established patterns of people fleeing conflict, war, persecution, escaping poverty and unemployment. What is new is the nature and extent of the social transformations produced by these movements which are challenging established ideas about migration itself. Major shifts in the scale and diversification of international migration serve to generate questions about identity, nation, citizenship, the reshaping of contemporary societies, community and place and, most pertinently for social work, raising questions about the adequacy and nature of responses within particular welfare regimes” (Williams & Mekada, (2014, p. i1)). This papers sets out to make a contribution to further reflection on the adequacy and nature of responses within particular welfare regimes surrounding temporarily admitted refugee people.

## 2. Dilemmas in the organization of humans in distress

World War II saw the most important displacement of human beings in the 20th century. Over 40 million people were forcibly displaced in Europe. The European context was of growing concern to Allied powers and due to this, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was set up in 1943 which was subsequently replaced in 1947 by the International Refugee Organization (IRO) and in 1950 by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR). The UNRRA was not set up specifically for refugee populations but for all people voluntarily or involuntarily displaced by the war. After the war, this organization dealt mainly with repatriation of displaced people as nation states complained of their existence and many refugees did not want to return to their homes due to new political governance. UNRRA was quickly submerged by the enormous task at hand along with depleting resources. Military forces were subsequently given the task to force people to return to their homes but lacked interest in the asylum seekers’ needs and the task to be accomplished. Due to this internal incoherence, the United States government withdrew 70% of funding needed to support the organizations mandate (UNHCR, 2000). The IRO was set up initially as a non-permanent United Nations specialized agency for three years (UNHCR, 2000, p.16). The objective of this organization shifted from that of repatriation to resettlement. Such a shift was highly contested by countries in the eastern European block who claimed that it would lead to various forms of abuse on behalf of the refugee populations. Xenophobic fears of this nature are still part of the discussion in 2016 and ironically, it is the children of those that refused asylum to others in 1947 that are now raising dissension amongst citizens of targeted countries.

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