

Ethical Challenge of Discerning Refugees from Economic Migrants: Critical Observations and Conclusions Regarding Slovak Capital Facing Huge Tide of Ukrainian Citizens Nowadays (Case Study)

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Original Article

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Source: *Clinical Social Work and Health Intervention*
Pages: 13 – 17

Volume: 13
Cited references: 11

Issue: 4

Reviewers:

Selvaraj Subramanian
SAAaRMM, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Harald Stefan
Vienna General Hospital, Vienna, Austria

Keywords:

Ethical Challenge. Media Image. Refugees. Economic Migrants. Ukrainian Citizens Tide. Abuse of the Situation.

Publisher:

International Society of Applied Preventive Medicine i-gap

CSWHI 2022; 13(4): 13 – 17; DOI: 10.22359/cswhi_13_4_03 © Clinical Social Work and Health Intervention

Abstract:

Objective: The aim of our research was to determine the distinction between behavioral patterns of refugees versus economic migrants from Ukraine in order to confute widespread Slovak media image of all incoming Ukrainian citizens as severely suffering from war trauma and being at the edge of their financial or material survival.

Design: Case Study from the Capital of Slovakia.

Participants: Ukrainian citizens living in Bratislava who entered Slovakia at the beginning of the time of the Russian invasion until today.

Methods: Analytical evaluation based on a critical approach to media image confronted with real situations regarding refugees versus economic migrants from Ukraine was applied. To grasp the issue of behavior of incoming persons, firstly, naturalistic observation method has been used.

Results: Using sensitive and detailed observation the distinction between Ukrainian refugees and economic migrants can be drawn and should be applied on a common basis. This should be based on their behavioral patterns as seen in praxis.

Conclusion: Discerning refugees from economic migrants needs to be done in order to ensure fairness towards incoming persons and also locals. The distinction should be based on objective observation of behavioral patterns of all the incoming Ukrainian citizens and based on that decisions of competent institutions and preparation of relevant legislation should be made. It is inevitable to start to grasp the problem of unjust generalizing approach and also to stop antisocial behavior on the streets, in the city transport, at the shops, in the doctor's waiting room, etc. of incoming Ukrainian citizens, who do not show any signs of war trauma and are obviously economic migrants, moreover, inadaptable. Continuation of peaceful living of locals should be granted by Slovak government both in the form of issuing proper legislation and by immediate implementation of legislation into practice. The Slovak media image of the current situation concerning this matter needs to be straight reconsidered, revised and by these steps to prevent and protect the community from further damage and overall reduction in the quality of life of all the inhabitants of the capital.

Introduction

By this particular study we are building upon themes of our recent studies dedicated to issues of migration, refugees, xenophobia, but also to finding constructive solutions regarding acceptance of migrant children. All these studies have been published in edited books issued by Faculty of Pedagogy of University in Trnava and Faculty of Pedagogy of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica. This study is focused on ethical challenge stemming from media images of all Ukrainian citizens coming to Slovakia being generally labeled as war victims and refugees regardless of their real status.

Nowadays, there are approximately 25 millions of refugees worldwide. Until April 29, 2022 a total of 5,468,629 people from Ukraine have entered Poland, Romania, Moldova, Hungary,

Russia, Slovakia and Belarus starting from the date of Russian attacks. The majority, about 3,000,000 of them, ended up in Poland (Schengen Visa, 2022). Even before the beginning of the war Ukrainians formed the largest foreign ethnic group living in the capital of Slovakia. Today, this group has increased to significantly larger number, so that overall life quality in Bratislava concerning all the inhabitants is necessarily influenced by behavior of incoming Ukrainian citizens. More than 11,000 Ukrainian applications for temporary refuge in Bratislava have been managed by Foreign Police in Bratislava until the last quarter of March this year.

With due respect to suffering and trauma of Ukrainian refugees, we have to be critical and take into account that not all incoming Ukrainians to Bratislava these days are essentially

refugees. Many economic migrants take advantage of or misuse this war situation and therefore, they confirm exactly the same patterns of behavior that we have been able to detect in the past among the inhabitants of other European countries where there have been wars in recent times.

Methods

Analytical evaluation based on the critical approach by media images confronted with real situations regarding refugees versus economic migrants from Ukraine was applied. To grasp the issue of behavior of incoming persons, natural observation method has been used.

Observational research methods are usually used by scientists in humanities and social sciences. Basically, we can divide them into 3 groups (McLeod, 2015): controlled observations; natural observation; participant observations. We have chosen the natural observation method because of its approach of observing participants acting spontaneously in their natural surrounding and ability of this method to grasp the whole happening, whole situation with all its aspects and elements. Controlled observation wouldn't bring wished results or knowledge. On the other hand there are also some limitations of our chosen method, but none of those well-known and described are of any significance for our research.

The Results of Empirical Research

Slovak media images in the news are defined by such values as conflict, scandalousness and story (Roncakova, 2017). While COVID-19 narratives dominated all the Slovak media during last 2,5 years, starting with the end of this February, when Russian attacks on Ukraine started, media topical priorities changed drastically. COVID-19 issue suddenly got a minimum or no space in media, and was overallly supplemented by the topic of Ukraine and Russia. This created a strong cognitive and emotional impact on people, who are even more endangered with potential war than before with unpredictable virus. Although media spread panics joined with univocal labeling all incoming Ukrainians as war victims, hence refugees, led to change of topic, this also led to confirmation and continuation of a pattern of a non-critical approach of Slovak audience or readers.

According to well-known definitions, refugees are persons fleeing armed conflict or perse-

cution, that is, individuals or groups whose lives are directly endangered. On the other hand, migrants make their own decisions to move while their lives are safe and aspire to higher quality in working, educational, financial, material, family reunion or other areas (Edwards, 2016). Listening to dialogues and discussions of people at public areas in Bratislava (streets, different means of public transport, shops, etc.), we have realized that significant majority of them actually do not make any distinction between the terms of refugee and economic migrant.

We argue, that using sensitive and detailed observation, the distinction between behavioral patterns of Ukrainian refugees and economic migrants can be drawn and should be applied on a common basis. Based on our application of the natural observation method, we have come to the conclusion that regarding actual Ukrainian inhabitants of Bratislava three major groups could be defined:

- economic migrants of higher material and economical status already from Ukraine, who drive expensive cars, live in fancy hotels and enjoy consumerism on every level of their life in Bratislava;

- economic migrants of lower material and economical status who came to Bratislava in order to gain better employment and potentially to send earned money to their close ones in Ukraine to support them; refugees with trauma and loss of life meaning, basic living securities and close human interconnections given by their place of origin or genealogy.

Surely, there are some common features of all of the above mentioned groups. All of them possibly struggle with language barriers and culturally conditioned differences connected to their effort of integration into a new society. All of them have to solve the questions of provision of healthcare, continuation of educational process concerning themselves or their children, but in the same time also to fight possible xenophobia tendencies of locals. What radically distinguishes refugees from the previous groups that we rank as economic migrants, are primarily: their challenges to find a new home – house/flat, struggles for securing their livelihood starting from point zero; trying to survive with minimal expenses on daily basis; face and try to overcome the psychical consequences of new and unknown life con-

ditions with undeniable background of war trauma.

Authentic refugees who suffer from home loss and perhaps also loss of their family members try, as much as they have some life energy left, to accommodate to new life circumstances, rely on own diligency and responsible work, honest money earning, while longing for their homeland, secondary both for safe place in new country and warm human acceptance.

Economic migrants of higher financial status from Ukraine do not have a need for safe place nor are seeking for acceptance; they often behave in disrespectful and superior manner; have to show off; they drive and park ruthlessly; they communicate noisy, aggressively or generally unculturally; have a need to verbally dishonor and insult employees in services.

Economic migrants of lower financial status from Ukraine often show a high grade of absence of basic hygienic habits towards themselves and community, shared areas, etc. They throw away their waste around themselves without any altruistic hygienic or aesthetic feelings. Their noisy and rude verbal and gestural expressions are significantly socially counterproductive. On the other hand, there are also many instances that show authentic willingness to contribute to life quality of Slovak society and these are precious and worth following the example both for other migrants and locals.

Discussion and Conclusion

Human dignity deserves respect and recognition regardless of social status, physical conditions or other aspects of a particular human and his/her life. The question of human dignity is even more significant in contexts that are the result of severe and unpredictable, uncontrollable life conditions that influence us and are determining our whole existence in body. Also, reciprocity of human interconnections was clearly described and expressed in many sacred texts or in particular their codexes of conduct that were written already in distant past and in diverse civilizations, cultures or emerging from manifold religious backgrounds (Zavis, 2017).

The protection of the refugees' rights and freedom in the context of protection of general human rights and freedom have been rooted in historical documents from years 1215, 1222,

1679, 1689, 1789, 1948, 2000 or 2007. Famous refugee conventions issued in the recent past (1951, 1967) confirm that the question of human rights, suffering and trauma connected to their forced change of place to live is not sufficiently answered and that human society with its tendencies for power, dominance and greed persistently cause new problems and endanger the basic stability of human lives. Ukrainian refugees who dominantly come to the capital of Slovakia are just *pars pro toto* in global sense.

Of course, that would be an enormous oversimplification of this issue if we would claim that all the authentic refugees behave unequivocally appropriately and in the line of acculturation, while all the economic migrants behave in inappropriate, asocial or in any aspect unacceptable manner. What we are trying to stress, is the matter of fact, that real life-threatening trauma of an individual or his/her closest people as the same as coping with its consequences, do cause personality changes to the extent that a person starts to behave meekly, humbly, submissively, tightly and without the slightest intention to draw attention to oneself due to inadaptability.

A person deeply marked by trauma usually does not simply have the space, the capacity for such behavior which causes public outrage or disorder (Horackova, Moravcova, Sevcovicova, Andrascikova, 2021). It is also well documented and known, that inner-directed negative moral emotions as shame, embarrassment or guilt lead people to ethical conduct (Tangney, Stuewig, Mashek, 2007).

Discerning refugees from economic migrants needs to be done in order to ensure fairness towards incoming persons and also locals. The distinction should be based on objective observation of behavioral patterns of all Ukrainian incoming citizens and based on decisions of competent institutions and preparation of relevant legislation should be made. It is inevitable to start to grasp the problem of unjust generalizing approach and also stop antisocial behavior on the streets, in the city transport, at the shops, in the doctor's waiting room, etc. of incoming Ukrainian citizens, who do not show any signs of war trauma and are obviously economic migrants, moreover, inadaptable. Continuation of peaceful living of locals should be granted by Slovak government both in form of issuing proper legislation and by

immediate implementation of legislation into practice. Slovak media images of the current situation concerning this matter needs to be straight reconsidered, revised and by these steps to prevent and protect the community from further damage and overall reduction in the quality of life of all the inhabitants of the capital.

Media images in this postliterate society are very powerful tools, and people, the users of different types of media, do not take into account this power that they are subjected to (Malik, 2021). We found that related to our topic of the absence of distinction between incoming refugees and economic migrants from Ukraine, one of the unwanted effects of this strong media influence on people, is formation of naive, uncritical solidarity in them. This solidarity is taken out of the real context. It is superficial, of predominantly emotional nature and resulting from crowd effect. During our discussions with certain people who had personal experience with war and life within its existential limitations, under its conditions, but also based on our own experiences with wars in former Yugoslavia, we have come to conclusion that none of those people showed the signs of above mentioned naivety and romanticizing approach. Therefore, we consider this finding to be well-grounded reason for making some adequate space in Slovak media for experience-based opinions to be presented, heard and discussed.

Regarding ethical background for creation of new, critical approach to given issue in form of revised media images we suggest implementation of principles of Habermas's *Discourse Ethics* (Bohunicka, 2002), as the same as Luhmann's Criticism of Media (Funes, 2021). Reconsideration of argument making and its usage in Slovak media are also strongly needed (Zouhar, 2022).

Declaration on Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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