Literature on youthful refugees addresses two distinct issues. First, scholars ask whether and how the refugee experience affects young people (sometimes, but not always, in comparison to other age groups). These scholars tend to focus on the trauma of the refugee experience. The work has tremendous potential for innovation because it represents the first foray into a new empirical realm. On the other hand, perhaps for the same reason, the literature is this area also tends to be under-theorized. The second issue concerning youthful refugees is their post-refugee resettlement experience in a new country. This emphasis is part of the growing attention to youthful migrants and the children of migrants generally. Scholars have come to appreciate that “acculturation” is a multi-generational process, and this makes the study of young people particularly important. Post-refugee resettlement research is better theorized than the effect of the refugee experience because it evolved as a way to test extensions of, and challenges to, older migration theories.

In this chapter, after discussing the history of refugees, we will elaborate on the work being conducted in each of these lines of inquiry, with a particular focus on Somali refugees and occasional references to other groups. We will conclude the chapter with a discussion of likely future trends in research on refugee youth.

The history of international refugee law

Refugees are not simply people who have fled their homes. Rather, “refugee” is a technical legal term that was created by an international treaty in 1951. It refers to people living outside their countries of origin who have a well-founded fear that if they return they will be persecuted because of their race, religion, nationality, political affiliation, or some other group status. Only individuals who fit within this definition qualify for assistance from the international community when they resettle in new locations.

In practical terms, this means that many destitute people driven from their homes are not eligible for protection as refugees. For example, only people who have moved across an international border can claim refugee status. Although the trauma of displacement might be felt just as keenly by someone who is forced to move 200 miles within one country as by someone who moves 20 miles from one country to another, only the latter is a refugee. Furthermore, if a
person was displaced by a tsunami, an earthquake, or out of fear of dying of starvation, she is not a refugee. Only individuals who face persecution meet the definition. In fact, although an estimated 32.9 million people were uprooted at the end of 2006, only 9.9 million of those individuals qualified as refugees (UNHCR 2007).

In addition, the formal requirements for refugee status are more likely to be met by adult men than children (or women). Traditionally, courts defined “persecution” as something done by states. Because adult men are more likely than children to be engaged in the public sphere, they are also more likely to be oppressed in this traditional sense. Children may face grave dangers during conflicts, but these dangers may be diffuse and not directly associated with their “membership” in some group. Danger itself is not enough to grant them formal refugee status. Likewise, although children are particularly susceptible to extreme poverty in a refugee situation because they may be separated from their adult caretakers, poverty is also an insufficient basis for granting refugee status. The system was set up with adult men in mind; this tends to work to the disadvantage of other groups.

The history of refugee law is also important because it illustrates changing ideas about children in international law. The 1951 refugee treaty did not incorporate special provisions for children. Children had to meet the same requirements as adults to qualify as refugees. In 1988, for the first time, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees created specific guidelines for dealing with child refugees. The guidelines emphasized the passive dependence of children and their need for special protections. A year later, a new international treaty addressed children’s issues generally and made some specific references to refugee youth. However, this treaty (the Convention on the Rights of the Child) took a very different approach from the guidelines. It emphasized that children are independent agents with distinct preferences and rights. Thus, international law initially ignored children; when it began to address their needs, it first treated them as passive and dependent, but later treated them as more autonomous agents with rights. These same transitions characterize the development of much international law in the twentieth century (Boyle et al. 2006). The most recent characterization of children as active agents under international law coincides with the rise of a similar perspective toward children within the social sciences.

The relatively recent creation of refugees as a formal legal category explains why social scientists only lately became interested in these individuals. Although sociologists have been studying migrants for a century, attention to refugees is much more recent. For scholars conducting research in this new area, an important question is whether voluntary migrants and refugees should be theorized separately (Hein 1993). The problem is that the legal distinction between refugees and other migrants is not necessarily socially meaningful. It is a laudable goal to develop social scientific theories that explain differences between groups of migrants, such as between migrants who are forced out of their homes with little warning and migrants who are able to weigh their options and carefully plan their move in advance. To do this, however, scholars cannot rely on the arbitrary legal definitions, but rather will have to identify independently socially meaningful distinctions between these groups.

The refugee experience for children and youth

Young people who are forced to flee their homes face as much, or even more, hardship as older people. They may lose one or both parents, or other significant relatives, in the conflict or the flight. They are likely to have to assume greater household responsibility, such as finding food or caring for their younger siblings if their parents are killed or disabled. They often lose extended support networks in the general displacement of communities. Their education may be delayed
or aborted because of the crises occurring around them. Because their lives suffer from upheaval during the most important socialization period of their lives, refugee children often suffer from mental health problems. There is a growing literature on the consequences of the refugee experience for young people. We will discuss a few illustrative studies here.

One focus of these studies is the mental health of refugees. Rousseau et al. (1998) found that refugees use dreams of the future as a tool to deal with the harshness of life in refugee camps. This can be very effective as a coping strategy, but it can also become an unhealthy obsession. Cindy Horst (2006) studied this phenomenon among Somali in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya. She found several factors that pulsed individuals into these resettlement dreams, which Somalis call buufis. Poor living conditions in the camp and news of continuing conflicts in Somalia (undercutting chances of return) tended to promote buufis. Although Horst did not discuss age variation specifically, young people appear to be particularly affected by these resettlement dreams. For example, in her interviews, she heard of a young man who had dreamed of moving to the United States, had put his life on hold in Kenya, and had made elaborate plans for what he would do after resettlement. When the US immigration agency failed to designate him a refugee, he was despondent and began to engage in bizarre behaviors. The young man had placed all his future aspirations on resettlement. Once in the refugee camps, trauma and unsettledness can lead to mental illness; youth seem particularly susceptible.

Fazel et al. (2012), reviewing the literature on the mental health of child and adolescent refugees displaced to high-income countries, find cumulative adversities at all stages of the young people’s journeys. While the pre-migration experience of exposure to violence and loss of family support is detrimental to children’s behavioral and emotional mental health outcomes, the prolonged transition into resettlement further exacerbates the negative effects. Specifically, Fazel et al. find general consensus in the literature that frequent moves, delays, and prolonged bureaucratic processes have negative effects on children’s mental health.

Many of the outcomes of the refugee experience for young people are gendered. Young men may be viewed as potential combatants, which place them in mortal danger. Actual combatants may see them as a potential threat and kill them before they can be recruited into military service. Luling (2006) tells of young Somali men who were killed by members of their own clan because they had not learned and were unable to articulate their family connection in a moment of confrontation. Another example is when, in a United Nations “safe zone” in Srebrenica in the former Yugoslavia, Serbs slaughtered Bosnian boys over 12 along with all the adult Bosnian males (an estimated 8000 individuals were killed) in 1995. Young male refugees are also at risk of being forcibly “recruited” to participate in the hostilities.

Girls and young women also face serious problems, but of a different nature. In times of turmoil, culture is often etched on the bodies of women and girls (Yuval-Davis 1997). In other words, females bear the burden of showing that their society is civilized during war. Girls may be under enormous pressure to act and dress in particular ways. For example, after the civil war, Somali women in the refugee camps began to wear more conservative clothing than was typical prior to the war (Abdi 2007). Most wear a jilbab, a long dress, covered with a chador, a long veil that covers the hair and neck and flows down to the waist. Rape has been widespread in the Dadaab refugee camp, and the hope is that the conservative clothing will make them generally less conspicuous to would-be rapists. Somali women and girls have also taken to wearing pants under the jilbab as an additional physical barrier to rapists. The clothing signifies the community’s civility and the individual woman’s chastity, and it also provides (minor) impediments to would-be rapists. Children and youth, who may believe these clothing requirements are time-less rather than transitory, sometimes lead the enforcement of dress codes, harassing or stoning women who are not veiled (Hammami 1990).
The clothing is not a mere inconvenience; it is part of a package of disadvantage for females that particularly affects young girls. In Dadaab, girls may engage in prostitution or be vulnerable to sexual exploitation, sometimes by international aid workers, because of their extreme poverty (Abdi 2007). Female circumcision, which was widely practiced in Somalia, is decreasing in most parts of the world, but appears to be stable or even be increasing in the Dadaab refugee camp (Abdi 2007).

Additionally, family poverty resulting from conflict and post-conflict settings can motivate girls to enter into mature relationships at a young age, sometimes resulting in early and unintended pregnancy. Schlecht et al. (2013), investigating the experience of young refugees in camps in northern and southwestern Uganda, reported that young female refugees are at higher risk of entering into informal marriages, where a customary bride price is not paid and, consequently, are seen by the community as lacking virtue, labeled “cheap,” “cursed,” or “bad luck” (Schlecht et al. 2013: 239).

Young female refugees are also generally disadvantaged compared to their male counterparts when it comes to formal social support. For example, boys and girls in Dadaab are segregated and indoctrinated through the formal education system to believe that such segregation is normal (Abdi 2007). Furthermore, as limited resources restrict access to education, some parents forego education for their daughters, particularly as the girls reach the early teenage years, when coeducational schools may be perceived as threatening. Mideast-based Islamic charities exacerbate these educational differences by providing scholarships mainly to boys (Abdi 2007).

Refugee children and youth after resettlement

While children often suffer disproportionately in the initial refugee experience, their flexibility and readiness to learn new skills can serve them well in the resettlement process. For example, they tend to pick up new languages and adapt to new social cues much more quickly and competently than their elders. This is one reason why recent migrant acculturation literature has focused specifically on 1.5 and second generation migrants, that is, migrants who moved to a new country at a young age or who were born in a new country to immigrant parents.

Scholars once viewed acculturation as an either/or process. Migrants either assimilated to the host country’s culture or they did not. Today, theories of acculturation are more appreciative of the nuances of this process. First, scholars today note that migrants may selectively retain aspects of other cultures while still embracing aspects of the host culture. Further, scholars recognize that complete assimilation of migrants to the host society is not the ideal scenario. They pay more attention to the special needs and capacities of refugee youths, especially in their experiences with the formal education system. For those young refugees who are fortunate enough to escape from the camps and resettle in a high-income host country, successful resettlement depends on a number of factors. The factors that influence outcomes for young people are (1) the experiences of the first generation, (2) the relationship between children and their parents, and their co-ethnic network, (3) barriers, such as discrimination, bifurcated labor markets, and inner-city subcultures which block upward mobility, and (4) resources for combating those barriers.

In this section, we will consider how each of these relates to refugee children and youth.

In terms of refugees, two experiences of the first generation set these individuals apart from other migrants. First, formal refugees are legal migrants. They are legally entitled to live in the receiving country. This sets refugees apart from undocumented migrants. Although both types of individuals tend to be poor, refugees do not need to evade authorities and are somewhat less vulnerable to exploitation as a result. At the same time, the refugee experience itself may weaken ethnic community ties (Boyle and Ali 2010).
The second experience that is unique to refugees is that they are usually entitled to some financial support from the government. In the United States, the financial burden to support refugees is increasingly falling on their sponsors (often extended family), but the government continues to provide small amounts of aid in the form of subsidized English language classes, subsidized housing expenses, food stamps, etc. This support is minimal, but is important in comparison to the aid received by other migrant groups – that is, generally none at all. Both of these factors tend to provide the children of first generation refugees with some financial security.

In terms of the relationship between children and parents, refugees may be no different from other migrants. The first generation tends to have a more difficult time with the receiving society language than the 1.5 and second generations. This is good for the children because it facilitates their incorporation in the new country. Further, refugee youths can serve as “resettlement champions” for their families (Shakya et al. 2010), particularly in seeking formal education and providing academic guidance to peers and younger siblings.

However, there are also often drawbacks to this precociousness. The primary concern, which Portes and Rumbaut (2001) call “dissonant acculturation,” is that the child’s knowledge of a new language and culture will so outstrip his or her parents’ knowledge, and the traditional family dynamic will be turned upside down. Young refugees especially tend to share a common experience in early life during wars and conflicts that the adults around them were unable to protect them. This often prompts such youth to develop strategies for survival, such as self-reliance, self-care, and formation of strong peer groups, which can ironically distance refugee youth from their parents (Bates et al. 2013). Additionally, youth are often simultaneously encouraged to stay loyal to their ethnic values and to master the host culture in school and social activities, which can create tension (Correa-Velez et al. 2010).

Role reversal in the family creates one obstacle to successful acculturation. Contextual factors provide other obstacles. These include racial, ethnic, or religious discrimination (see Waters 1999), and blocked opportunities in the receiving country’s labor market (see Bean and Stevens 2003) and education system (see Earnest et al. 2010). For example, research also shows that the overwhelming majority of racist experiences takes place at school and are exacerbated by structural and institutionalized practices, such as a teacher’s passivity in dealing with racialized incidents (Uptin et al. 2013).

In some countries, researchers and policy-makers have started to initiate legislation to support these youth. For example, in the UK, the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 requires relevant institutions to assess and meet the needs of all eligible unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people in order to help them with long-term planning and preparation for life (Wade 2011). Service providers for young refugees such as those supporting homeless youths are encouraged to understand the youths’ proactive characteristics and address their specific concerns by respecting the youth’s autonomy and providing guidance toward future education and employment, rather than just providing them a place to stay (Couch 2011).

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) propose that the best way to combat discriminatory barriers is strong families and dense, supportive, co-ethnic communities. Refugees often settle in the same community and provide support for one another (see, e.g., Fadiman 1997). As an illustration, Ellis et al. (2010) studied Somali refugee adolescents and found that although Somali girls are strongly affected by discrimination in their experience of resettlement, having strong connection with their cultural origin contributes to a sense of pride and identity. Somali girls who strongly identify with their cultural heritage are more impervious to demeaning comments and other acts of discrimination from members of the host culture (Ellis et al. 2010).
Conclusion and directions for future research

It is encouraging that recent studies are focusing directly on young refugees, but work on the refugee experience is still a-theoretical or unsystematic in the selection of theories. This is unfortunate and impedes the accumulation of knowledge in this area. One promising theoretical direction for this research would be to focus on the role youth play in cultural continuity and cultural change in the refugee context. This would complement and yet be theoretically distinct from the migrant resettlement literature. The resettlement literature is more theoretically developed and shows a greater appreciation of the importance of children for understanding acculturation. Especially as it relates to refugees, this work would benefit from greater attention to the role law plays in defining deserving or undeserving migrants and the consequences of these categorizations for acculturation.

References


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