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Images of the future of young refugees

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Images of the future are products of fears, hopes and anticipations developed by human beings in order to confront the uncertainty of the future. They influence their holders' decisions and behaviors and become evident when the future arrives. Unfolding the images of the future of refugees as a vulnerable social group provides a beneficial source of information for effective decision-making toward their empowerment. This article describes several factors affecting the images of the future of refugees and argues why images of the future of refugees must be investigated and contemplated.

Future has always been uncertain and unknown and what is uncertain and unknown can be intimidating. In order to prepare for what future may unfold, human beings have been developing images of the future. However, nowadays, due to the growing complexity of social reality and increasing feeling of insecurity, creating personal images of the future is a challenging task which in turn affects the procedure of identity building specifically for young people.

We are living in an advanced phase of modernity when uncertainty has cast a shadow on everyday lives and choices. The pace and dimension of change in the current time is incomparable to any other historical epoch and people need to make choices constantly. This situation brings up new opportunities and possibility for adaptive changes as well as more risks and conflicts of value and interest. Nonetheless, while people from more advantaged social positions and with abundant socioeconomic resources are equipped to exploit the opportunities, risks and threats are more inclined toward less advantaged and more vulnerable social groups.

Refugees have experienced fear and insecurity, left their previous lives and attachments behind in search for better living conditions. They (specifically the ones who are new to the country of settlement) usually have less fallbacks and safeties to rely on, or do not have enough knowledge of their available alternatives. They need to verify their identities through combining their self-perception with the reflection they receive from the new society and their interaction within the new habitance. Sense of 'ontological security' as confidence in continuity of their self-identity is broadly related to their ability to manage relations with other people and the environment. Are they at ease in the new environment or they feel out of place? Do they feel their bodies to be the extension of their environment or they are experiencing 'third person consciousness' (a concept introduced by Fanon)? Their situation, their perception and position and the social, cultural and economic barriers they may experience will have impact on their already blurred visons of the future as well as the possible lack of shared values and understanding with the mainstream in the new society. The consequent inability to imagine the future in a clear way lowers their self-resilience, makes them more vulnerable to the uncertain situations and leaves them with the feeling of powerlessness and frustration.

Images of the future in social procedures

Images of the future and social reality reinforce each other. Images of the future have the ability to act as cultural forces, create change and push their holders forward toward certain objectives. They are the products of knowledge, taste, value and needs which emerge as hopes, fears and expectations. The influence of the images of the future on decisions and choices, whether consciously or unconsciously, have been discussed in several studies. The future(s) envisioned by individuals can induce action and effort and how people expect to perform in the future has a self-fulfilling value. Despite the importance of the subject, there is a considerable gap in the research concentrating on the images of the future of young refugees (and refugees in general).

Refugees have usually fled from war and insecure living conditions where they were focused on every-day survival. These personal experiences will affect their images of the future and make them different from the images of the future of people with more secure life history. Several studies on the images of the future of young people have demonstrated that they usually have problem in relating to the issues with disastrous magnitude and cannot imagine them happening in the course of their own lives. In many cases, they anticipated calamities, e.g. war, violence and climate disaster, happening in not-so-distant future but further from the domain of their personal lives and consequently not seriously influential on their own futures. In other words, while they project the current societal concerns to the future and imagine them in global or even local scales, when it comes to their own future, they show new signs of optimism which are absent from their global and local views, This makes their images of the future conflicting. This perception of distance, unreachability and excess has been attributed to the life experience of these people and the fact that issues which at the moment are far away in time and space become abstract and difficult to imagine in one's personal future. These attitudes, in turn, cause the feeling of disability to influence the situation and to create change. However, the condition is expected to be significantly different for refugees. For them, many of these catastrophic events are not outside the personal frame of experience any more. Thus, how will these experiences be reflected in their visions for their personal future? Now they are living further from the phenomena which made them to flee from their home countries but how will they influence their images of the future of the world? How their previous life circumstance affect their attitude toward the future? Does it boost proactivity or augment despair and disability for creating change? Do their images of the future display some degree of conflict between their personal and global/local aspects? The importance of finding the answers to these questions make it worthwhile to investigate the images of the future of refugees in general and young refugees in particular.

Understanding refugees' images of the future can provide a valuable source of information for making informed and effective integration policies. It has been discussed that a considerable gap between the images of the future of the individuals and those of the policy-makers, while providing an opportunity for authentic development, can lead to the loss of legitimacy in a society. Moreover, the procedure of exploring the images of the future has an educational value, motivating the refugees to contemplate their approaches toward the future. It can improve the future awareness and stimulate them to adopt more proactive attitudes. It has been also argued that there is a solid correlation between thinking about the future, clearly imagining the future and being optimistic about it. Investigating possible changes in the attitudes of refugees toward the future throughout the years of being established in the country of settlement can also lead to crucial results.

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